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ROISIN O'CONNOR: WHY ISN'T LILY ALLEN UP FOR THE MERCURY PRIZE?



Texts sent from phone of British woman found dead inside suitcase in Athens



Nuclear plant on alert as Suffolk wildfire spreads

Authorities at Sizewell B are monitoring a blaze that has spread to the RSPB Minsmere nature reserve

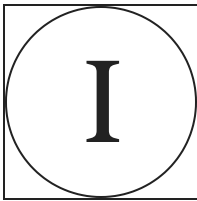
FOOTBALL REVOLT

Europe to boycott World Cup in fury over sell-off plans

All 55 Uefa nations unite in protest at Infantino's bid to seek private investors – via firm founded by brother of Trump's son-in-law – and say historic tournament 'is not for sale'



The war in Iran is about to unleash a world of pain for the US president



f what Donald Trump said over the last few months about his unplanned and ill-starred war in Iran were to be believed, it would be over by now.

Among other wonderful things, Iran would have undergone secular regime change, its nuclear capacity “obliterated” and its ambitions irrevocably renounced and subject to international inspection. The Strait of Hormuz would be free, in every sense, to international shipping, and Iran’s associates, Hamas and the Houthi rebels, would have been smashed, with the eager assistance of Israel.

So far from being a permanent destabilising regional menace, Iran would today be reborn as a reliable friend and ally of the US, recognising the state of Israel and open for lucrative business deals.

Well, Iran isn’t like that. The only claims that the US president made that have been proven accurate are that the old ayatollah is dead (but seemingly replaced by more capable militants), and that Iran’s antique conventional military, air force and navy have been eliminated.

The rest, as Mr Trump would never say, is failure – indeed, failure at an operationally epic scale. It is America, not Iran, that is running low on munitions. Through a combination of Israeli cynicism and his own blundering misjudgement, as well as

Iranian stubbornness and ingenuity, all Mr Trump has achieved is to set in motion the kind of never-ending quagmire of a conflict that he promised the American people he would never drag them into. Maga is getting disillusioned.

In fact, the most concerning thing now is not so much that the war is intensifying – the bombing by both sides is more or less routine – but that it is now widening. For example, there has been an upsurge in Israeli settler aggression in the West Bank, apparently supported by a complacent Israeli army. The ceasefire in Gaza hasn't stopped the killing there either, and the Trump-sponsored plan for reconstruction remains a weird pipe dream.

For the first time, Egypt has been attacked – an Iranian or proxy drone has hit a port on the Mediterranean coast. Saudi Arabian forces are also being dragged back into conflict with the Houthi rebels to the south in Yemen. This is because Houthi forces are attacking ships trying to pass through the Red Sea via the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, analogous to the Strait of Hormuz on the other side of the Arabian Peninsula.

The world's oil and gas supplies are thus under renewed threat. Iranian-backed militias in Iraq are continuing to target US bases, and Iran's surprise attack on American forces in Jordan shattered a brief lull in the fighting. Civilian infrastructure, military facilities and the energy industries of Kuwait and the UAE continue to be vulnerable – and they are now hitting back.

Not to be left out of the action, Beijing is reportedly supplying Tehran with hundreds of shoulder-held surface-to-air missiles. Ugly rumours continue to the effect that Russia is helping Iran hit US assets, though President Trump seems inexplicably relaxed about this.

Any one of those developments would have provoked concern even in such a disorderly part of the world as the Middle East. But never before have the disparate religious, racial and national hatreds and rivalries broken out quite so violently, all at once. From Cyprus to Iraq and from Lebanon to Oman, every nation

state, militant group and faction is getting stuck in, and with an often indiscriminate attitude to the use of military force and the rules of war.

It is difficult to discern exactly how this combustible mix will bring fresh misery and destruction – but it is surprisingly easy to see how it could be de-escalated: America must get out of its war on Iran, and force Israel out with it.

The terms, formal or implicit, for an end to this senseless conflagration will not amount to anything like President Trump's various stated war aims. The Trump administration will hold no veto over who runs Iran; there will be no “unconditional surrender”; and Iran will continue to hold “nuclear dust”, ballistic missiles and lots of drones.

All the president can do – must do, for the sake of the global economy – is to declare victory (again), move his forces out, and move on to a process of longer-term diplomatic talks aimed at a more comprehensive settlement. In that endeavour, he will have the full support of Gulf, European and east Asian allies.

It will be painful for him – but not as painful as the losses he faces at the mid-term elections in November, and the multiple charges of impeachment that will follow. Even if he cares little for the rest of humanity, he still needs to save his own skin. Time is running out.

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Uefa to boycott Fifa World Cup if Infantino's sell-off plans proceed

All 55 member associations vote for action unless plan to sell stakes in competition withdrawn

Jamie Braidwood



Fifa boss Gianni Infantino with Donald Trump at the World Cup final in New jersey (PA)

Football's European governing body has announced a boycott of Fifa competitions, including the World Cup, if Gianni Infantino's controversial plans to sell off stakes in its tournaments to private investors are voted through.

The drastic action, which follows an emergency meeting yesterday, was "unanimously" agreed among all 55 of Uefa's member associations. A statement confirmed that "no Uefa national teams will participate in any Fifa competition for so long as these proposals remain alive".

Uefa carries significant leverage as a World Cup without major nations such as champions Spain, France, England and Germany

would compromise Infantino's designs on extracting as much revenue from the global showpiece as possible. Six of the eight quarter-finalists from this summer's World Cup were European.

It would also harm next year's Women's World Cup in Brazil, with Spain the reigning winners and European champions England also bringing considerable commercial interest in the tournament. England, runners-up at the 2023 World Cup, face two-legged qualification play-offs in October, as do Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

A spokeswoman for the English FA echoed the Uefa sentiment, saying: "We stand shoulder to shoulder with our European colleagues and fully support the collective view. We oppose Fifa's plans – the Fifa World Cup belongs to football and always will."



Uefa president Aleksander Ceferin, right, has gone to war with Infantino (*Reuters*)

Meanwhile, the majority of the 2030 World Cup will be staged in Europe, with Spain and Portugal sharing hosting rights along with Morocco, following games in South America hosted by Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay to commemorate the tournament's centenary year.

On Tuesday, Fifa revealed plans to create a new \$20bn subsidiary, 20 per cent owned by private investors, to manage the commercial rights and delivery of the World Cup and other major tournaments. Thrive Eternal, led by Joshua Kushner, the brother of US president Donald Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, is set to lead the new investment.

“This is not merely a profound failure of leadership, but an abdication of Fifa's duty as the custodian of world football,” Uefa said. “The moment external investors acquire ownership interests in Fifa competitions, football changes forever. Commercial return becomes a permanent obligation. Investor expectations become a daily pressure.”

In a letter to the member associations, Infantino promised that national federations would benefit from an increase of its “Fifa Forward” funding from around \$8m to \$20m for the upcoming four-year cycle between 2027 and 2031 if the new FFE subsidiary is created.

Additionally, the letter states that a “one-off” payment of another \$20m would be made available for member associations who vote for Infantino's proposals on 19 September. Member associations are then warned that their funding for the 2027-2031 cycle would only stand at \$10m if the vote does not pass, meaning they would miss out on \$30m.

Uefa's statement added: “National associations around the world are now presented with an ultimatum: accept the irreversible capture of football's greatest competitions or bear the consequences. This is not a ‘democratic decision’, but governance by intimidation – an act of coercion unworthy of an institution entrusted with the stewardship of the global game.”

Many of the world's smaller countries, especially those outside of Europe, are more dependent on funding from Fifa to run their national teams, develop long-term grassroots projects and invest in infrastructure, like pitches, academies and stadiums. Before

this year's World Cup, Infantino claimed that “without Fifa, there would be no football in 150 countries in the world”.



Spain won World Cup 2026 earlier this month (Getty)

Uefa's confirmation that it would stage a boycott comes ahead of a vote between Fifa's 211 member associations on 19 September. Infantino's proposals only require a majority vote of above 50 per cent, as well as backing from the Fifa Council, which means Uefa still requires more support from another federation, such as North America or Asia, to have a chance at winning the vote and avoiding a boycott.

Uefa's statement in full

“Uefa and its 55 member associations stand as one. We unanimously and unequivocally reject Fifa's proposal to transfer ownership interests in the World Cup and other Fifa competitions to private investors.

“The World Cup cannot be treated as an investment product. It is one of football's greatest sporting legacies. It has been built over generations by players, national teams and supporters across every continent. No part of it should ever be surrendered to private investors. The World Cup is not for sale.

“It is both irresponsible and indefensible that a proposal of such significance for football was conceived in secret and brought to the brink of approval without any meaningful consultation with those entrusted with stewarding the game. This is not merely a profound failure of leadership, but an abdication of Fifa’s duty as the custodian of world football.

“National associations around the world are now presented with an ultimatum: accept the irreversible capture of football’s greatest competitions or bear the consequences. This is not a ‘democratic decision’, but governance by intimidation – an act of coercion unworthy of an institution entrusted with the stewardship of the global game.

“But our opposition goes far beyond process.

“The moment external investors acquire ownership interests in Fifa competitions, football changes forever. Commercial return becomes a permanent obligation. Investor expectations become a daily pressure. From that moment onwards, every decision on the international calendar, every decision on competition formats and every decision shaping the future of football is no longer driven by what best serves the game, but by what best serves shareholders.

“This model has no place in world football. Football’s future cannot be dictated by the expectations of those whose first duty is to maximise financial return. Nor can the interests of national associations, leagues, clubs, players and supporters become subordinate to investor returns. Football cannot mortgage its future for financial gain.

“Europe’s position is clear. We will never lend this model our legitimacy. No one has the moral authority to sell what they merely hold in trust for the next generation.

“As a result of today’s discussion, no Uefa national teams will participate in any Fifa competition for so long as these proposals remain alive, unless this proposal has been abandoned in its entirety and binding assurances have been given that Fifa will

never again open its governance or competitions to private ownership.

“Nobody should be in any doubt: Uefa and its national associations will oppose these plans with absolute determination.

“There are moments when institutions are judged not by what they are prepared to accept, but by what they refuse to compromise. This is one of those moments.

“Some things are simply too important to sell. The Fifa World Cup belongs to football. It always will. And so long as Europe has a voice, it will never be for sale.”

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Inside Uefa's World Cup boycott plans – and what Fifa might do next

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Hundreds of people evacuated as Suffolk heathland wildfire rages

Sizewell B nuclear power station on high alert as grassland blaze proves difficult to contain

Holly Evans



A firefighter at Dunwich Heath, near Leiston (*Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service*)

Hundreds of people have been evacuated and a major nuclear power plant is on alert as a huge wildfire threatens homes on the Suffolk coast, with Britain gripped by its fourth heatwave.

A major incident has been declared with families, including babies and children, from 200 properties, holiday cottages, a farm and a caravan park forced to flee in the middle of the night as the flames engulfed Dunwich Heath on Wednesday.

More than 120 firefighters worked throughout the night in “arduous conditions” to control the “large-scale, wind-driven” inferno, which is spreading rapidly southwest, posing a threat to the 19th-century St James’ Church and prompting major

concerns over the safety of the energy plant Sizewell B, which supplies electricity to 2.5 million homes.

An evacuation centre has been set up at Westleton Village Hall and Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service chief Jon Lacey said it was “difficult to say” when they will be able to return, warning the blaze was expected to rage for up to 36 hours. The cause of the fire has not yet been established.

It comes as fire services across the UK are under extreme pressure, with nearly 400 wildfires recorded in July so far, making it the busiest July on record. The National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) said the number of wildfires this year has already reached the total number for the whole of 2021, 2023 and 2024 combined.

Phil Garrigan, chair of the NFCC, said: “Wildfires are no longer isolated or seasonal events. They are becoming a recurring and growing feature of the risks facing our communities and emergency services. As climate and environmental conditions continue to change, we must ensure our fire and rescue services are equipped to meet that challenge.



Around 90 firefighters have been mobilised to tackle the blaze (*Billy Rogers/Facebook*)

“We cannot afford to treat wildfires as an emerging risk any longer. They are a reality now, and our national capability must evolve accordingly.”

Meanwhile, the whole of Wales and half of England is now in drought, with other areas at risk, as rivers run dry and farmers warn record dry conditions could fuel food shortages and price hikes.

Anna Seymour, 56, had been staying at a log cabin with her two kittens at Cliff House Holiday Park in Suffolk, where 200 caravans were evacuated, when she became aware of smoke along the heath.

"I can't remember the exact time we were [evacuated]. I was sitting at the clubhouse and there was lots of noise, fire engines. It's something you never obviously hear there because it's just not a place to hear any noise really, and lots of fire engines were going up towards the heath," she told *The Independent*.

“Then it was about 20 minutes later, someone said that Dunwich was on fire. I went back to the lodge to check the kittens, and then somebody knocked at the door and said, 'go to the evacuation point.'” She described the evacuation as a calm process, but said there was a “lot of smoke” once they left the site.

Justin North told the BBC that there was “hammering” on the door of his holiday cottage at Dunwich Cliffs at around 11.30pm and that he and his wife were asked to “go immediately”.



Firefighters are set to continue dealing with the blaze for the next 24 to 48 hours (*Sky News*)

The couple were forced to sleep in their car before being able to access the evacuation centre, where they said there was a “kind of blitz spirit” among residents.

The blaze is around 3 miles away from Sizewell B, where authorities are understood to be monitoring the situation, which firefighters called “live and dynamic”.

A spokesperson for EDF, which operates the site, said: “The fire at Dunwich Heath is not currently affecting operations at Sizewell B power station, but we are continuing to monitor the situation.”

Authorities confirmed the major incident status was enacted in Suffolk “due to the size and complexity” of the rapidly developing situation, with the fire currently travelling inland.

Dan Davis, a station manager for the service, has issued an urgent plea for the public to steer clear of the area and ensure windows and doors remain shut.

The prime minister has pledged that the fire service will have “all the support” it needs to deal with the blaze. Speaking to

reporters, Andy Burnham said: “We’ve got the situation under close monitoring, and I’m receiving regular updates.



Andy Burnham has promised the fire service will receive ‘all the support’ it requires
(Reuters)

“It is a very serious incident. I will make sure that Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service have all of the support, the mutual aid, the other services that they need, and any other resources that need to be brought to bear.”

Thérèse Coffey, the former Tory MP for the area, said it was “sad news” and expressed hope that the blaze did not spread to the RSPB Minsmere nature reserve.

The Suffolk blaze is one of several major wildfires being tackled across the UK. Eight wildfires are currently burning and “being monitored” in other parts of Britain, with fire chiefs warning that there remains an “elevated risk” of more igniting.

It comes as the UK experiences its second drought in two years, with very low rainfall and high temperatures taking a toll on the environment, affecting 28 million people.

The Environment Agency warned that swathes of England are suffering from “flash drought”, including East Anglia, Hertfordshire and the whole of London, Thames Valley, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, Devon and Cornwall, the West

Midlands, and Wessex – covering Dorset, Somerset, Wiltshire and Gloucestershire.



A helicopter flies water collected from the sea to drop on the wildfire close to the Sizewell B nuclear power station (PA)

The UK Health Security Agency said England is on track this year for the highest number of deaths caused by heatwaves since figures began, with the record-breaking heatwaves of May and June leading to 2,877 deaths. That is almost double the 1,504 deaths linked to heatwaves in June to August last year.

In Scotland, crews said they were making “significant progress” tackling a wildfire in the Cairngorms that is still burning after two weeks.

Several homes in the remote region were evacuated as plumes of smoke billowed into the sky, and vast swathes of trees, heather and grasslands have been left charred and blackened.

Speaking on Wednesday, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) deputy assistant chief officer Michael Humphreys said that fire crews are making progress in tackling the blaze. However, he warned the risk of flare-ups remains high.

“It’s been an absolutely devastating fire for wildlife and for the local community who have come out in force to really support

us, which we really do appreciate,” he said. “To control this fire, what we’ve had to put in place is a significant number of fire breaks.”

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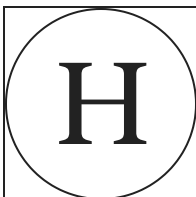


If the drought gets political, will Burnham do a rain dance for TikTok?

Sixty years ago, Labour was forced to appoint a ‘minister for drought’ – with surprising results. **Sean O’Grady** looks at how this summer’s extreme weather could become a political hot potato



Things were different in the 1970s; model Cerica, 19, at the dried-up Pitsford Reservoir in Northamptonshire in 1976 (PA)



alf of England and all of Wales is now officially in drought. It’s not just weather; the economic and political repercussions of extreme weather around the world are gradually making themselves felt.

Is this unprecedented?

Not quite – and we’ve had droughts before, notably the long summer of 1976: little rain fell between May 1975 and August 1976. But rarely have there been so many droughts quite so close together, let alone combined with soggy winters; there have been three droughts in the past five years – 2022, 2025, and now 2026.

What does it mean for farmers?

They’re on the front line and are finding it difficult to cope. For some years in succession, record hot summers have been recorded, and a combination of those and wetter winters is making it harder for farmers to grow traditional crops and rear livestock. At best, it means earlier and smaller yields and harvests; at worst, it means money spent on irrigation and storage is wasted as crops fail entirely.

Donald Trump’s war in the Middle East has also driven energy and fertiliser bills higher, while policy decisions on taxes and wages have made life more difficult for some in agriculture. A crisis is underway.

What happens then?

More food will have to be imported, putting pressure on the trade deficit, and there will be higher inflation than would otherwise be the case. Parts of agriculture that have lost subsidies since Brexit will fall into crisis and demand financial help from the government – an early and painful challenge for Andy Burnham.

Who to blame?

It would be no bad thing if there were an increasing realisation on the right of politics that climate change is real and that local and international action is needed to counter it and save life on Earth (northwest Europe being especially badly affected by the long-term trends).

There are some signs of this happening, although Kemi Badenoch is still demanding that Conservative parliamentary candidates renounce the net zero targets previously enshrined in

law by Theresa May. The mounting evidence of a climate emergency will harm those parties, notably Reform UK, that stay in denial, and help the Greens (but perhaps not that much once the drought has passed).



Denis Howell was made 'minister for drought' in 1976 (Getty)

What can the government do?

Besides rescuing farmers from bankruptcy, it could double down on net zero policies – rather than eroding existing commitments, as Burnham is doing – and get on with building more reservoirs, irrespective of what is happening to broken water companies.

Soon there will be calls for Burnham to “do something” more immediately, but his options are limited. In the summer of '76, the prime minister James Callaghan appointed the sports minister, Denis Howell, as a coordinating “minister for drought”;

he was quickly nicknamed “minister for rain” by the press, who begged this portly Brummie to do a public rain dance.

Howell urged calm, oversaw the standpipe rationing and gave out water-saving advice such as sharing a bath with your partner. Perhaps Burnham might set a similar example, maybe tastefully filmed for a TikTok?

If not, he could promote the existing minister for water, Emma Hardy, to “minister for lack of water” – she is already running something called the National Drought Group, which includes the Met Office, civil servants, regulators, water companies, farmers, the Canal & River Trust, anglers and conservation experts. Will she have to tell the prime minister, “No Andy, I’m not doing a rain dance for the socials”?

What can we do?

“Small steps, such as turning off the taps when brushing teeth or shaving, taking a shorter shower or fixing a leaking toilet can really add up,” says the government.

Will it ever end?

Yes. Shortly after Howell was appointed half a century ago, the long dry spell broke and rain poured down on a grateful, parched nation. Howell had performed a miracle, but neither he nor the Labour government got the credit.



Regional mayors to keep share of income tax collected in their area

David Maddox Political editor



'I know what it's like to be ignored by politicians in Westminster,' says Burnham as he unveils another new policy (PA)

English mayors will be allowed to keep a share of the taxes collected in their area, Andy Burnham has said as part of his pledge to “take power out of Westminster and carry it into every postcode in the country”.

The prime minister's plans to let mayors keep a slice of income tax and business rates come as part of his bid to incentivise regional leaders to promote economic growth in different parts of the UK.

However, the plan falls short of the suggestion that he would allow mayors to raise taxes themselves by devolving control over

income tax, as it has been handed to the Scottish and Welsh parliaments.

Details of the reforms are expected to be announced in a white paper, published when chancellor John Healey presents his first Budget in the autumn.

But Mr Burnham, who was mayor of Greater Manchester for about nine years, said the policy would be designed so that “every local leader will have the power and resources to improve public transport, build homes and create jobs”.

The rate of income tax which billpayers face will not change as a direct result of the reforms, according to the government.

Ministers will retain an equalisation system, so areas where less tax is collected continue to receive financial support.

Mr Burnham said: “I said we’d take power out of Westminster and carry it into every postcode in the country. Today, we make good on that promise.

“Under our plans, more of the taxes raised in a community will stay in that community. Soon, every local leader will have the power and resources to improve public transport, build homes and create jobs.

“I know what it’s like to be ignored by politicians in Westminster. I’m not going to make that same mistake now I’m PM.

“The whole of government will now pull together behind the people and places that desperately need our support. This is how we’ll bring back hope and bring power home to you.”

Several parts of England have a mayor, including Greater Manchester, the Liverpool City Region, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, and South Yorkshire, including Rotherham and Sheffield.

They have powers over issues such as transport, skills and infrastructure planning.

Mr Burnham hosted several of the local leaders at his inaugural No 10 North meeting in Manchester last Friday, when he told them: “What I’m trying to do here is make the UK one team where we’re all pulling behind you because your place is where growth happens or it doesn’t happen.”

Voters in parts of the country will elect mayors for the first time over the coming years, including in Greater Essex and Hampshire and the Solent.

Mr Healey said: “The people who best understand what skills employers want, what transport an area needs and where investment can make the biggest difference are those who live there.

“For the first time we’re giving mayors a share of income tax so communities directly benefit when their economy grows – passing power out of Westminster and driving growth in every postcode.

“This is the way we start to build new hope and advance the working people of this country.”

Housing, communities and local government secretary Angela Rayner said the announcement would put “an end to the begging-bowl culture of the past”, instead giving locally elected leaders “the tools they need to drive the change that communities have been crying out for”.

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Farage plummets to lowest approval level since the last election in new poll

David Maddox



A More in Common poll has revealed that Nigel Farage's approval rating has hit an all-time low of -32 per cent (PA)

Nigel Farage's approval rating has hit its lowest level since the 2024 general election, according to a new poll, in the latest evidence that Reform UK is on the verge of seeing its support collapse.

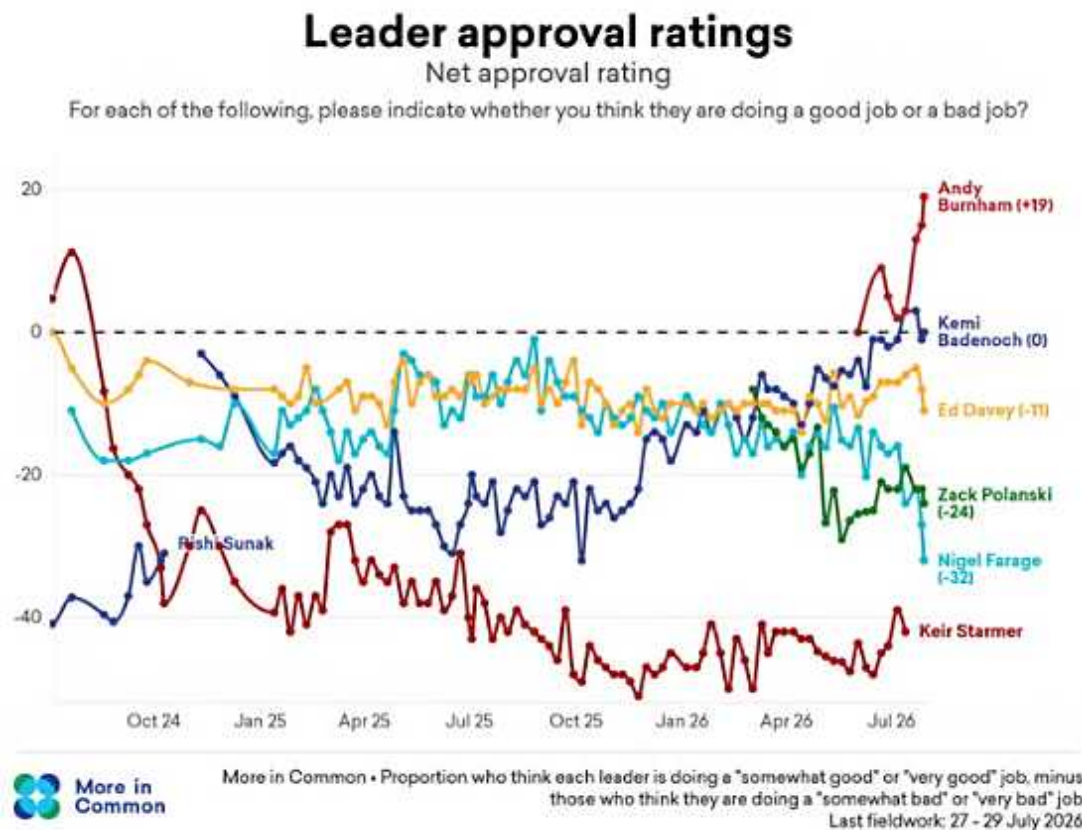
According to More in Common's latest approval rating for party leaders, Mr Farage has plummeted to -32 per cent, a drop of around 10 points in just two weeks.

Meanwhile, new prime minister Andy Burnham has hit +19 per cent as he continues to benefit from the momentum built during his first few days in office. His approval rating outranks the high

of +11 achieved by Sir Keir Starmer shortly after taking office in summer 2024.

Tory leader Kemi Badenoch is on 0, and Lib Dem leader Sir Ed Davey rates at -11 while Green Party leader Zack Polanski, who has also seen a dramatic downturn in his fortunes, is on -24. While Mr Farage is still above the -49 per cent that Sir Keir hit at one point in his premiership, the More in Common findings are the worst for at least two years for the Reform UK leader.

Luke Tryl, the UK director of More in Common, said: “What may worry Farage is less the rise in disapproval – he’s always been polarising – and more the decline in raw approval, suggesting some previous fans are wavering.”



The latest findings come days after another poll by More in Common saw Labour overtake Reform UK for the first time in more than a year, leading the way with 28 per cent (up four points), while Mr Farage’s party is down two points to 24 per cent.

It is the first time since March 2025 that Labour has led the way, with Reform in second place and the Tories just behind in third

on 22 per cent.

The rapid decline in Mr Farage's popularity comes after weeks of negative headlines, with questions still unanswered over undeclared gifts and donations, as well as benefits he received from adviser George Cottrell, a convicted fraudster.

Meanwhile, polling guru Professor Sir John Curtice noted that Reform UK itself has suffered a three-point dip in its popularity since Mr Farage quit as an MP to call a by-election in Clacton, in an attempt to pre-empt a parliamentary standards inquiry into him potentially triggering a vote in his constituency.

While there are 34 candidates contesting the by-election, Mr Farage is expected to win by a landslide after the major parties refused to contest the vote. His leading challenger is the comedian Count Binface. However, leading polling expert Lord Robert Hayward has warned that the decline in popularity of Mr Farage is a much bigger problem for Reform than for other parties.



The rapid decline in Farage's popularity comes after weeks of negative headlines (PA)

He told *The Independent*: “Nigel Farage is tied to the Reform brand more than any other party leader is to theirs. That means

that if his support drops then it shows that Reform are in real trouble and this could be the beginning of a real decline.”

But he added: “It is hard to put your finger specifically on what has caused Farage’s rapid decline. It is not just the issues about donations. I think there is something to be said about the way Andy Burnham has dominated the news; it has all been about Burnham.”

Since taking over, Mr Burnham has taken on Mr Farage on social media platforms with a series of TikTok-style videos including blind pub snack tasting. He has also announced consumer-friendly policies such as a £2 bus fare cap, 20 per cent off pub business rates and VAT off energy bills.

While there are still question marks over how Mr Burnham will pay for his pledges, he has also made it clear he plans to solve the social care crisis, end rough sleeping and bring defence spending up to 3 per cent of GDP.

Prof Curtice noted that Mr Farage’s decision to call a by-election means that under Ofcom rules it makes it difficult to interview him without referring to the other 33 candidates.

“It means he has been off the TV screens because the by-election makes broadcasters nervous,” he said. “There is no doubt though that Andy Burnham and Labour are using the summer recess to control the news agenda like Nigel Farage and Reform used it last year.”

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Palestine Action founder can appeal terror ban, says Supreme Court

Holly Bancroft Home affairs correspondent



A protester is arrested outside Westminster Magistrates' Court yesterday (Getty)

Palestine Action can appeal its terror ban at the Supreme Court, judges have ruled, setting up a final legal battle with the Home Office this autumn.

The Court of Appeal ruled last month that the group's proscription under terrorism laws was lawful in a major win for the government.

Lady Chief Justice Baroness Carr said that Palestine Action's ban was "a justified and proportionate interference with individual rights", describing the group as one that "overtly promotes unlawful violence amounting to terrorism".

Now three justices at the Supreme Court have granted Palestine Action co-founder Huda Ammori permission to appeal the ruling. The challenge will be heard this autumn.

The ban, which began on 5 July last year, made membership of, or support for, the direct action group a criminal offence punishable by up to 14 years in prison.

Palestine Action was banned by then-home secretary Yvette Cooper in July 2025 after members broke into RAF Brize Norton and vandalised jets to protest the war in Gaza.



Huda Ammori said she would continue her legal fight to the European Court of Human Rights if necessary (*Peace Pledge Union/YouTube*)

A five-judge panel at the Court of Appeal found that Ms Cooper's decision struck a "fair balance" between the need to safeguard national security and disrupting individuals' rights to freedom of expression and assembly.

After the judgment, Ms Ammori said the decision was "one of the most extreme attacks on free speech and the right to protest in modern British history".

Before the case reached the Court of Appeal, High Court judges had found that the ban was in fact unlawful, arguing that only a small number of Palestine Action's activities amounted to

terrorism, and that the group's acts had not crossed the high bar to make it a terrorist organisation.

This week, the Metropolitan Police warned protesters campaigning in front of Westminster Magistrates' Court that expressing support for Palestine Action is a terrorism offence.

Some 77 people were arrested at the protest in central London yesterday, police said.

Hundreds gathered outside the magistrates' court where more than 2,000 cases related to supporting the group had been due to be heard. But their cases have been adjourned to October, to await the outcome of the Supreme Court appeal.

Responding to the news that her case will head to the UK's highest court, Ms Ammori said yesterday's arrests "further evidences our case that the proscription of Palestine Action has become a vehicle for a far broader crackdown on expressions of solidarity with the Palestinian people".

She added: "We will continue to fight this proscription all the way to the Supreme Court and, if necessary, to the European Court of Human Rights to overturn what has become one of the most extreme attacks on free speech and the right to protest in modern British history".

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Edinburgh holiday let owners fear new tourist tax will fuel black market

Amelia Neath



A five per cent levy will be charged by accommodation providers on all visitors to Edinburgh (Getty/iStock)

Owners of self-catering accommodation in Edinburgh have raised concerns over the city's new tourist tax, claiming that it puts increased pressure on small businesses.

Edinburgh became the first place in the UK to introduce a visitor levy city-wide when the new tax came into force last Friday, 24 July.

The City of Edinburgh Council has welcomed the new levy, stating that funds raised will help alleviate the pressure tourists put on the city's infrastructure by reinvesting them back into public services.

All paid accommodation in the Scottish capital will now charge a five per cent fee on top of the original booking cost, capped at five nights in a row. The tax will be collected by the accommodation provider, and it will then be paid to the local authority.

While the levy will provide a new pot of funds for the council, some small holiday lets that are tasked with charging and collecting the levy are concerned about how it will impact their businesses and the wider tourist industry in Edinburgh.

And with the Fringe just days away, opinions are divided among visitors, too. Earlier this week, Fringe performers told *The Independent* they welcomed the new tourism levy, to offset the impact of weekend breaks such as stag and hen dos. But Scottish Ballet – which pays more than £200,000 annually to accommodate its artists in Edinburgh – recently revealed that it would be cancelling some of its shows in December. The company’s executive director, Steven Roth, said that the “economics of touring to Edinburgh are fast becoming unsustainable” with the tax.

A bureaucratic headache

Paul Phillips, who has been running a short-let self-catering accommodation in the centre of Edinburgh for the past six years, said that while he thinks the levy is a good idea, in principle, the city council did not engage with the sector to create a “proportionate and fair” scheme.

“I think the levy is a good idea because it’s good for visitors to put something back into the city,” he said. “Somewhere like Edinburgh, where there is a lot of tourists, they make demands on the city’s infrastructure, so I think the levy in principle is a very good thing to have.”

However, Mr Phillips added that collecting the tax puts pressure on small businesses. He said that it’s “a highly complicated scheme that’s got lots of exclusions.

“It’s very complicated to work out because it’s not just a simple percentage. You’ve got to subtract non-accommodation elements from the levy,” he added. “The five per cent doesn’t seem a lot, but many businesses are paying 20 per cent VAT, and we actually have to pay VAT on top of the levy as well.”

Accommodation providers have to exclude extra charges when working out the tax, as it should only be levied on the cost of the accommodation. This means that items like meals, drinks and transport all need to be subtracted when calculating the levy.



The head of Scottish Ballet says that the ‘economics of touring to Edinburgh are fast becoming unsustainable’ (*PA Archive*)

The value needs to be worked out before VAT is applied. Since the visitor levy is treated as part of taxable turnover, it is also subject to VAT. All providers must be able to show clearly how the visitor levy has been calculated. The law requires them to keep all necessary records for at least five years.

“So the five per cent actually becomes six per cent,” Mr Phillips added. “So we have 26 per cent of our costs going out in taxation of VAT and levy. The council itself did no economic impact study to say, ‘well, if we raise the levy at this amount, will people stop coming to the city? What will it do to accommodation prices?’”

He said not enough was done by the council to work with businesses “to design a scheme that was easy for us to operate, and they should have done an economic kind of analysis of the impact of the levy”.

The Independent understands that the council conducted consultations with businesses in 2024, as well as the public, in the lead-up to the levy. It also invited key bodies to test the new levy payment platform, and it was tweaked after initial feedback.

Ralph Averburch, who owns self-catering accommodation in Edinburgh and is the director and operator of the Edinburgh branch of the Association of Scotland’s Self-Caterers (ASSC), agreed that the new levy scheme will make running the business more complicated.

“We are already paying 20 per cent VAT on top of all the other things that come with running a business in terms of staff costs and national insurance costs,” Mr Averburch said. “Suddenly they bring in a visitor levy that, in some cases, will slot small businesses into the VAT thresholds, which is a huge additional burden. To add insult to injury, it’s also been concocted in such a way that it is an absolute nightmare to implement.”

Angus Neilsen, who owns several self-catering units across Edinburgh, said it is “unfair” that accommodation is the one sector out of the entire tourism industry that has to collect the tax.

He added: “All the other businesses that also benefit don’t pay it. Restaurants, bars, visitor attractions, tour companies – all of these are benefitting, but they are not being expected to work out any of the costs.”

The decision to make accommodation providers collect the levy was set out in the Visitor Levy (Scotland) Act passed in 2024.



Accommodation owners want to see the levy reinvested into aspects of the city that tourists use (*VisitScotland*)

The holiday let black market

The business owners also raised concerns over the increased competition the levy will create between licensed businesses and those which advertise without a licence, enabling them to dodge the visitor levy.

Mr Averburch said that black market accommodation is not being policed or controlled in any way. He added: “They’re now adding a visitor levy, which all of these, if they were legitimate licensed properties, should be paying. But of course, they’re not going to pay this.”

Unlicensed accommodation providers use platforms such as Facebook to advertise their rooms, but will not display a short-term let licence number. Mr Neilsen said he would “almost be happy” if the levy money raised were used to pay for enforcement of the black market.

How the tax will be spent

The council released a list of areas where the levy will be spent, including support for festivals, upgrading public toilets, green spaces, and creating a city centre policing unit. The

VisitScotland visitor levy guidance says the benefits to visitors can be either direct or indirect.

Mr Averburch believes that spending funds on policing or cleaning up streets and emptying bins would be a mistake as they are already “statutory responsibilities” for local authorities.

“That’s them utilising this pot of cash to cover what would have historically been paid for out of the other funding sources that are delivered to [the council] on an annual basis,” he said.

Ahead of the visitor levy being implemented, the council announced that some of the funds would be used to create almost 500 affordable homes to help with the city’s housing crisis. The accommodation owners we spoke to agreed that this is not what the levy should be spent on, as it should be reinvested into aspects of the city that tourists use.

“I think housing is a great idea. We need more houses in the city, but the levy is not there to fund housing,” Mr Phillips argued. He said he agreed that the council should spend the funds on making the city cleaner and supporting cultural events like festivals.

The council said more affordable homes will free up B&Bs currently used for temporary accommodation by residents. The chief executive of the ASSC, Fiona Campbell, said that it is “broadly known that the ASSC is fundamentally against a business levy”.

She added: “But having said that, Edinburgh’s made its decision, so now our concentration has to be on implementation, and that implementation being efficient and fair, which it’s not, progressively. What we want to make sure is that Edinburgh is transparent about the way it’s being spent.”

Council leader Jane Meagher said in a statement: “We’ve always said this is a citywide fund and spending decisions need to be taken with the whole city in mind – and we’re very grateful to

Edinburgh's businesses and residents for their constructive feedback and support throughout the process.

“I'm very aware of how busy the city's accommodation providers are at this time of year, and we're continuing to do everything we can to support them as the scheme comes into effect. This is a big opportunity for us all to work together and enhance Edinburgh's position as one of the most popular visitor destinations in the world.”

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Pictures of the Day



(Reuters)

Bear necessities

Ice cubes help during a heatwave at Prague Zoo, Czechia.

Reuters



Smoke signals

A plume of ash rises from a crater of the Mount Etna volcano in Sicily. *AFP/Getty*



On a wing and a prayer

The moon shines behind the Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. *Reuters*



Back to life

A mosque and surrounding buildings in Somang village in Lebak in Indonesia's western Banten province, which was deliberately flooded to make way for the construction and filling of the Karian Dam that opened in 2023 and has now re-emerged due to the El Nino-driven drought. *AFP/Getty*



Pampered pooch

A woman places an ice bag on her grandmother's pet dog, Miru, at a shelter for people whose homes were damaged by an earthquake in Uki, Japan. *Reuters*

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Home news in brief



A bungalow in Hambleton, Lancashire, was almost completely destroyed after Darren Davies blew it up (PA)

Man blew up childhood home over will

A Lancashire man who blew up his childhood home because he wrongly believed he had been cut out of his parents' will has been jailed for four years and four months. Darren Davies, 55, set fire to the £260,000 bungalow in Hambleton, where he had lived with his brother Craig, after the deaths of their parents. Neighbours heard a loud explosion on 27 March 2024 as the roof collapsed, and Davies told a passer-by: "My family want the house. If I can't have it, no one can."

Preston Crown Court heard Davies placed three gas cylinders around the house, poured petrol into the loft and lit a candle, causing an explosion that put nearby residents at risk. His brother told the court their parents had left the bungalow equally to both sons, but Davies became convinced there was a secret will leaving it solely to Craig. The blaze destroyed family

photographs, jewellery, diaries and other treasured possessions, with Craig seeking more than £170,000 in compensation.

The court heard Davies had a long history of mental health difficulties, including bipolar disorder, depression, anxiety and autism spectrum disorder, and a psychiatrist concluded he was suffering an “autism crisis” when he started the fire. Defence barrister Neil Ronan said Davies had intended to end his own life and had made “massive progress” since receiving treatment in custody. Sentencing, Judge Philip Parry described it as “a sad and serious case”, but said Davies' responsibility had been “substantially reduced by your mental disorder”. He will serve up to half his sentence in custody before being released on licence.

PA

Abbott readmitted to Labour after year-long suspension

Diane Abbott has been readmitted to the Labour Party after an internal investigation, the veteran MP has said. She was suspended from the party in July last year after repeating comments about racism for which she had previously apologised.

Fellow Labour MP Joani Reid was also readmitted to the party yesterday evening after she “voluntarily” suspended herself in March this year following the arrest of her husband on suspicion of spying for China.

In a statement on social media Ms Abbott said she had been “issued with a formal warning” over a separate tweet in which she referred to the Israel Defence Force as the “Jewish Defence Force”.

Apologising for the tweet, she said she had “used wording that conflates the actions of the state of Israel with the Jewish community” and was “deeply sorry for any hurt caused by that conflation”.

The year-long suspension was the second time Ms Abbott had had her Labour membership suspended.

She had previously been investigated by the party over a letter to the Observer in 2023 in which she suggested that Jewish, Irish and Traveller people experience prejudice, but not racism.

The long-serving MP was subsequently readmitted to the party in time to contest her Hackney North and Stoke Newington seat at the 2024 general election.

In her own statement, East Kilbride and Strathaven MP Ms Reid said she was “excited to play a full part in supporting our new prime minister, Andy Burnham, his government, and in renewing Scottish Labour”.

Police chief quit before misconduct ruling

A chief constable who abruptly resigned the day before a misconduct hearing would have been fired had he not already quit, a panel has found. Christopher Noble was suspended from the top job at Staffordshire Police in August 2025.

However, the 52-year-old resigned on Tuesday in a letter to Staffordshire Police and Crime Commissioner Ben Adams, the day before a misconduct hearing was due to begin. The hearing went ahead at Staffordshire Conference Centre in his absence, and concluded yesterday.

The panel found the allegations against Mr Noble proven. However, the details of his misconduct cannot be reported due to restrictions imposed by the panel. Former parliamentary commissioner for standards Kathryn Stone, the chair of the panel, said that Mr Noble had breached the police’s Standards of Professional Behaviour.

Audience member faints at London play

The opening night performance of *Cleansed* at London’s Almeida Theatre saw Sarah Kane’s provocative play live up to its reputation – with one audience member fainting during a graphic scene. First staged in 1998, *Cleansed* is one of five plays by the late playwright Kane, who died by suicide in 1999 at the

age of 28. It is noteworthy for its visceral violence, prolonged nudity and dark themes.

Previous productions of the play have drawn similar responses from some theatregoers, with the 2016 version at the National Theatre making headlines, thanks to a spate of faintings and walkouts among the crowd.

During Wednesday's press night performance of the play, directed for the Almeida by Rebecca Frecknall, an audience member was seen receiving assistance from staff before being helped from the auditorium. *See review below*

Explosive diarrhoea infection spreads to UK

A parasite outbreak linked to explosive diarrhoea has spread to the UK, after leaving thousands sick in the US. The UK has seen a rise in cyclospora infections among travellers returning from Mexico, according to figures published by the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) yesterday.

Cyclosporiasis infections lead to nasty but non-life-threatening symptoms, such as “explosive diarrhoea” and vomiting. “You’re barely able to make it to the toilet,” Dr Alejandro Macías, an epidemiologist and physician at the University of Guanajuato in central Mexico, told *The New York Times*.

The latest figures show that 67 cases have been reported among returning travellers in England (30), Scotland (27) and Wales (10) between 30 April and 15 July 2026 – a sharp rise on previous years, when an average of 93 cases was recorded across an entire year. A total of 48 cases reported are from people who travelled to Mexico, with one also reporting travel to the USA. One further case reported travel to the US only, and one to Kenya.

RECOMMENDED



Plenty of blood, scares and despair, but the full horrors are kept at arm's length

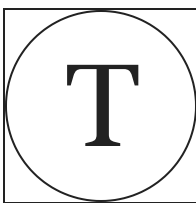


On patrol with the local heroes saving communities from terrifying wildfires

James C Reynolds joins the relentless volunteer firefighters in Gironde, who are guiding the emergency services, and even using watering cans to dampen the flames and ashes



Clinging to the back of a pick-up truck in the forests around Lacanau, our intrepid correspondent joins volunteers to spot break-out fires (*James Reynolds / The Independent*)



he pick-up truck shudders to a halt and an outstretched arm signals the silhouette of a lone deer racing through the blackened woods.

There are six of us squeezed into the back of the Toyota Hilux, all clinging onto a caged water tank as we bounce along the dirt roads of a forest ravaged by wildfires. Sandy firebreaks have created a stark contrast between the verdant woodland surrounding Lacanau and the devastated areas in monochrome, still heavy with smoke.

Lacanau, a coastal town some 48km (30 miles) west of Bordeaux, has mobilised over the past week to meet the fire threat head-on. Dozens of volunteers are now working around the clock to guide firefighters, feed the displaced and to put out fires.

I arrived in the area as visitors were ordered to leave, with a looming heatwave expected to exacerbate the situation in the coming days.

Taxis and buses refused to go directly to the town, and google regularly showed there was no viable route to Lacanau at all.



A pick-up truck with water and volunteers ready to circle the forests and scout for break-out fires



Little remains of the verdant forests surrounding Lacanau

Police had set up checkpoints around the perimeter and there was a steady stream of motorhomes coming the other way as we tried to press in.

My guide was Pao Borecka, a 31-year-old who had moved to the woodland commune six years ago and started organising cultural events and painting. Now, she says, she has no time to paint while running between the canal at Pont du Hourbiel – where volunteers are pumping water and running patrols – and the town, where locals are preparing food and tending to evacuees.

Residents have been playing their part for nearly a week since the wildfires broke out on 22 July, razing hundreds of buildings and forcing nearly a quarter of a million people in the wider area from their homes.



Locals look after a wild pig, one of many made homeless by the wildfires



Residents carried buckets of water into the devastated landscape to help put out fires themselves

The fires have drawn in emergency services from across the country, but they seem to depend on the bravery of the locals, willing to risk their lives to show them through the woods. Every few minutes, a patrol car arrives back at the canal and another heads off laden with volunteers, sometimes in front of fire trucks.

After several days in the forest, some of the volunteers have eyes reddened and voices broken from the smoke. The long walks into the woods have left others with burns on their ankles and blisters upon blisters on their feet. Pao says she has lost two pairs of shoes already walking through the smouldering forests, which warm your feet if you stand too long. The job is hard, but it has to be done.

The visit itself is bleak; the air is thick and poisonous, refugees rest on camp beds in an empty hall, and people speak candidly of plans to flee the commune and rescue loved ones if the fire worsens. But it is the fundamental good-heartedness of the people of Lacanau that shines through.



A volunteer on top of a truck watches as Canadair water bombers pass overhead



Firefighters stop to rest and eat at the centre offering food in town

All expect to be here until the fire is out. None hesitate or falter in giving all they have to the gargantuan effort ahead of them. Some say they have been here for five days already, some working 15 hours a day, but nobody for a moment seems to lose sight of their task.

Many have lost businesses and had to take in friends, relatives and strangers displaced by the fires. But they also know how much they still have to lose; in Le Porge – half an hour south – it is said more than 150 homes have been gutted since last week.

And so, despite the tiredness, despite the sun and the mental strain that everybody acknowledges, columns of volunteers continue to march from the canal to the forest “like ants”, with watering cans and buckets to stop ashes from reigniting.

In the town, people do the same. Grandparents make sandwiches for delivery to the volunteers. Local restaurants, closed by the fires, offer what they can. Pick-up trucks stream back and forth with water and aid while Canadair water bombers swoop overhead, the frontlines now just 2km away.

And even as an outsider, the locals ensure I am safe: they offer me a face mask before fixing their own; they encourage me to eat

when we are tired from carrying water; they call through a list of taxi companies to find one willing to drive me back out while they remain.



Nico, one of the volunteers working to contain the fires



At the port, residents collect water to use in firefighting efforts in the forest



Eighteen-year-old Mathias Monseigne was among a group of brave volunteers supporting fire crews at the Pont du Hourbiel in Lacanau

I am in awe of Pao and her unwavering energy for doing what is right. She acknowledges the risk to herself by continuing her work, and recognises when she needs to rest or laugh, to self-regulate. But she and her neighbours move with an infectious sense of duty to keep going in spite of all that has been lost.

We see on our journey from the back of the pickup truck spreads of animal feed and water left out in the charred forests for the other lives touched by the fires. This job, like that, demands at times a calm detachment to carry on without being overwhelmed by emotion. But at others, it is impossible not to be moved by the gentle reminders, in the worst of times, of the prevailing good in humanity.

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Spain will send troops to Ceuta after thousands of migrants arrive from sea

The head of the Spanish enclave's regional government called for the army to be deployed

David Latona



Spanish media reported that around 2,000 to 3,000 crossed from Morocco into Ceuta on Thursday (Copyright 2026 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.)

Spain is set to deploy its military to restore order at its “totally collapsed” border with Morocco in Ceuta, after nine people died during a mass migrant crossing from Morocco.

The armed forces will send 60 people to reinforce police in the Spanish enclave, after the domestic force was overwhelmed on Thursday by thousands of migrants.

Madrid said it would send the Armed Forces to help the Civil Guard “to maintain security in the city of Ceuta”, adding that prime minister Pedro Sánchez would join interior minister Fernando Grande-Marlaska on a visit to the area today.

“The situation is absolute chaos,” Rachid Sbihi, head of the association representing Spain’s Civil Guard officers in Ceuta, who police the border, said.

“It’s not possible to give precise numbers, but there are thousands of migrants crossing,” he said, adding that the border had “totally collapsed”.

Video footage showed hundreds of migrants swimming over from the Moroccan side using inflatable inner tubes and other flotation devices, and others breaking through a gate in the fence and running into the city, many shouting, “Viva España!”

State television TVE reported that 2,000 to 3,000 people had crossed.



Footage showed crowds of people walking around the breakwaters at Tarajal beach (AP)

The scene was reminiscent of the crossing that occurred in May 2021, when some 10,000 people from Morocco and sub-Saharan Africa, many of them minors, entered the enclave of 85,000 people in a matter of days.

Achraf Maimouni, a member of the Moroccan Association for Human Rights in northern Morocco, described the situation as "exceptional."

“The Tarajal border was opened under unusual circumstances this morning and people crossed,” he said.

The move to bring in the army comes after authorities in the tiny Spanish territory called on the government to declare a national emergency and send in the army.

Ceuta is located on the northern African coast, bordering Morocco. Spain is a main point of arrival into Europe for migrants seeking better economic opportunities or an escape from violence in their home countries.



Spain stands out in Europe for its softer stance towards migrants (AP)

The escalation at the border between Spain and Morocco comes after a surge in migrants attempting to reach the small exclave, mainly by swimming.

Spain’s interior ministry said it would guarantee the safety of its citizens and the nation’s border, but that the government could not declare a national emergency over migration concerns.

Footage showed crowds of people, mainly Moroccans, walking around the breakwaters at Tarajal beach onto local roads.

A Guardia Civil spokesperson said the migrants were “massively entering from the sea” through the Tarajal breakwater, but could

not provide any estimates for the numbers. State news agency EFE said some had scaled the border fences without swimming.

Migrant rights activist Zakaria Zarroqui said the situation “remains out of control as we speak”, adding that people were still flocking to the Moroccan city of Fnideq in an attempt to cross into Ceuta.



Locals called for the army to be drafted in to deal with the situation (*Reuters*)

Juan Jesús Vivas, the head of Ceuta’s regional government, called for the national government to declare a national emergency on grounds of national security, asking for more police and for the army to be deployed on the border.

Mr Vivas said the additional police and soldiers would be necessary “to guarantee the inviolability of the frontier and citizen safety”.

He had warned on Wednesday that migrant reception centres were overwhelmed with hundreds of people sleeping on the streets.

Many local shops were shuttered. Enrique Serrano, who runs a women’s clothing store in central Ceuta, told Reuters business owners were organising themselves to protect their property and

families in case of possible disturbances as they believed police resources would be insufficient.

“I’m not opening this afternoon because the situation is extremely tense ... The first thing I have to do is protect my business and my family,” he said, adding that when the fence was breached after midnight, hundreds of migrants rushed through in a matter of minutes.

The interior ministry said that legislation covering a declaration of national emergencies does not consider migration flows as a risk to national security.



A local shopkeeper said that when the fence was breached after midnight, hundreds of migrants rushed through in a matter of minutes (AP)

Government administrations are “coordinating to respond with speed and efficacy to the situation in Ceuta”, it said.

The ministry said the Moroccan government was “closely cooperating” with Spain to handle the situation, saying that Moroccan police are stopping “numerous people” trying to cross the border.

Earlier this month, Spain’s Supreme Court ruled that migrants intercepted at sea while attempting to reach Ceuta or Melilla cannot be summarily returned under the enclaves’ special

border-rejection regime. “It has been a slow trickle since the Supreme Court’s ruling, but today has been an explosion,” the Guardia Civil spokesperson told Reuters.

Spain’s Socialist government stands out in Europe for its pro-migrant stance, and has recently launched a programme to provide legal status for some 500,000 undocumented migrants, creating an influx of applications double that number.

Right-wing parties criticised the drive, arguing it would attract more migrants to Spain, and were quick to blame Mr Sanchez for allowing the situation in Ceuta to reach crisis proportions.

AP

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Netanyahu says Israel has 'special forces' ready if he is arrested abroad

Maira Butt



Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he would press ahead with a trip to New York after the city's mayor, Zohran Mamdani, urged the US government to arrest him for suspected war crimes (*Reuters*)

Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu says he is not afraid of being arrested as a suspected war criminal in New York and that special forces are on standby if it were attempted.

New York City's mayor, Zohran Mamdani, recently called on the federal government to enforce an arrest warrant issued against Mr Netanyahu by the International Criminal Court in 2024.

While the US is not a member, the arrest warrant means Mr Netanyahu is now an internationally wanted suspect and that the ICC's 124 member states – including the UK – would be obliged to arrest him if they were to enter their territory.

In an interview with Sean Hannity for Fox News, the host asked Mr Netanyahu if he feared landing in the US in a situation such as a “medical emergency”.

“You travel internationally, God forbid you had a medical emergency, and you need to land, and you’re about to land in a country that recognises the ICC. It could complicate things. Do you worry about that?” Hannity asked.

“Yeah, I think about it,” Mr Netanyahu responded. “You know, we have special forces around. I served for five years.”

Hannity responded that the Israeli military was “pretty tough”, to which Mr Netanyahu said: “Yeah. Let’s give them a new task.”

He said he had no plans to cancel an impending trip to New York in September for the United Nations General Assembly.



Zohran Mamdani describes Netanyahu as a ‘war criminal’ (Getty)

“First of all, I’m going to New York... I’m going to speak the truth in front of this hate-spewing elected official,” he said. “He’s pitting one group of New Yorkers against the others. He’s turning them against New York Jews. I mean, what are we, in the 1930s? So much hate. So many lies.”

A warrant for the Israeli leader's arrest was issued in November 2024, accusing him of being "responsible for the war crimes of starvation as a method of warfare and of intentionally directing an attack against the civilian population" in Gaza.

He is also accused of "crimes against humanity of murder, persecution, and other inhumane acts from at least 8 October 2023 until at least 20 May 2024".

Mr Netanyahu denies the claims and has called them "antisemitic".

Mayor Mamdani told *The New York Times*: "I believe that prime minister Netanyahu belongs in The Hague. He's a war criminal who has been charged by the International Criminal Court. And what you will find is that it is an opinion that is held by many purely because of what his actions have wrought over these last many years."

He later clarified that New York did not have the jurisdiction to enforce his arrest but called on the federal government to take action. But Donald Trump has said that Mr Netanyahu will not be arrested if he lands in the US.

"Benjamin Netanyahu will not be arrested, in any way, shape, or form, while in the United States of America," he wrote in a Truth Social post. "He is fighting against the Islamic Republic of Iran, which recently killed 52,000 innocent protestors, and has spent the last 47 years killing American Soldiers, and others.

"The only ones that should be arrested are the people that led Iran into this unprecedented SPIRAL OF DEATH AND DESTRUCTION, something that should have been dealt with years ago by previous Presidents!"



Mysterious final texts of Scottish woman found in suitcase in Athens

Dan Haygarth



Elisabeth-Jane Ross, 38, had been travelling alone and arrived in Greece via Cyprus from the US (*Supplied*)

A string of text messages was sent from the phone of a Scottish woman in an apparent attempt to cover up her death before her body was found in a suitcase in Athens, police say.

The body of Elisabeth-Jane Ross, 38, was discovered in a derelict building in the Kypseli area of the Greek capital on 18 July. Ross is believed to have died between five and seven days before she was found. However, investigators said that her phone remained highly active following her death, *The Times* reports.

The content of messages sent during that period has not been revealed by Greek police, the newspaper said, but the authorities believe they were sent in an attempt to cover up Ross's death

and stopped once her body was discovered. No suspect has yet been identified.

According to local media in Greece, texts sent from Ross's phone to her family on 15 July said that she "needed some time to herself" and that she "wanted to be alone for a while".

The *Daily Mail* reports that another message was sent from her phone, after police believe she had died, to a Greek friend she had been staying with days before she was found. It read: "I need some time – I'm going to a Greek island."

The newspaper reports that investigators say the phone remains missing but was active in the area of Athens until approximately 24 hours ago.

Speaking on the BBC's *Reporting Scotland* yesterday, *The Guardian*'s Athens correspondent Helena Smith said Ross had been in Greece for about two weeks before she died. The journalist said messages were then sent from Ross's phone in an apparent attempt to put those looking for her off the scent.

"She had been staying with a Greek friend here in the capital, and then she disappeared," Ms Smith said. "It would seem that someone had control, and I use that word very deliberately, over her mobile phone after she died, and was sending messages clearly to distract from the scent, to distract the authorities and her close friends from trying to track her down."

Ross had travelled to Greece via Cyprus from the United States, where her fingerprints were registered. It has been reported that her identity could not be established at first because there were no signs of identification. But Ms Ross was identified by Greek Police after Interpol examined fingerprint data.

Greek and Cypriot authorities are reportedly working together to exchange information as they try to track down the person who abandoned the suitcase containing her body.

They are also reviewing security camera footage, witness statements and other evidence in an effort to identify people

who may have interacted with her and to find out more information on the circumstances surrounding her death.

A spokesperson for Greek police said: “Further details have been requested regarding when she arrived in Greece, how, and with whom. We cannot provide further details at this stage, as the investigation is fully under way.”

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office said: “Our thoughts are with Elisabeth’s family during this difficult time. We are providing consular support and are in contact with the local authorities.”

A Police Scotland spokesperson said: “We are aware of the death of a Scottish woman in Athens and are liaising with authorities in Greece. Officers are providing support to her family in Scotland.”

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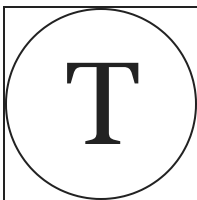


Family of dissident asks for EU help in Macau's first national security trial

China's tightened national security laws in the Portuguese colony face their first test in the prosecution of a veteran public servant. Campaigners explain his plight to **Alisha Rahaman Sarkar**



Au Kam-san, a teacher who became one of Macau's longest-serving pro-democracy legislators, pictured in 2024 (Photos AFP/Getty)



he last time Cherry Au spoke to her 68-year-old father, the call lasted just 54 seconds before a prison guard ordered him to hang up.

A year later, Cherry is still waiting to speak to Au Kam-San, one of Macau's longest-serving lawmakers who remains incarcerated awaiting trial under the China-ruled city's national security law. He is being held at the city's Coloane prison.

Au was arrested for alleged collusion with foreign forces to endanger national security, the first known arrest under that law

in Macau, in a case that has many echoes of Beijing's brutal crackdown on the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong.

Au, who holds joint Portuguese citizenship, is one of the most prominent opposition figures in Macau and had been a lawmaker for two decades in a legislature dominated by Beijing loyalists. He decided not to seek re-election in 2021 after the Macau administration followed Hong Kong's example by barring pro-democracy figures from running.

In an interview with *The Independent*, Au's daughter says his arrest – one year ago yesterday – came completely out of the blue.

“We didn't have any sign that something like this would happen,” says Cherry, a London-based fashion photographer. On 30 July 2025, police barged into Au's home without warning and seized his phone, laptop, and books, which included some titles related to the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre.

Au was at home with his wife and one of their daughters when police came.

“They ... took my mother away first and then stayed in the apartment with my dad collecting evidence,” Cherry says. “They basically did a search, and then they took him away after a couple of hours.”

Cherry says police initially tried to treat her mother as a witness, but she declined after learning her legal rights and was released the following day. “She was very shaken and didn't know what was happening,” she adds.



Coloane prison in Macau, where Au is currently being held awaiting trial

Since then, she alleges that Au has been denied calls and visits from his family and access to a private lawyer. He faces 10 years in prison if convicted following a closed-door trial conducted under Beijing’s national security procedures.

The family learnt through a court statement that Au had a preliminary proceeding on 2 July, Au’s daughter Au Hon I says. The statement says his lawyer was appointed by the court and approved by Au.

“He always believed in the justice system of Macau,” she says. “He believed it so much that he feels that he will be protected by the very justice system that is putting him where he is right now.”

In August last year, Macau’s Public Prosecutions Office said “compulsory detention” had been imposed on Au after a “preliminary investigation” following his arrest at his home.

The European Union swiftly condemned the arrest by saying it heightened concerns about the “erosion of political pluralism” in the Chinese territory, but stopped short of calling for his release.

Cherry says the family fears for the health of her father, who suffers from diabetes, although the Chinese authorities claim he has been provided with appropriate medication.

Since 2020, public life in Hong Kong has been shaped around Beijing's national security law, imposed to crack down on pro-democracy protesters. At least 400 people have been charged and 160 convicted under the law in Hong Kong.

Now, Chinese president Xi Jinping's alleged crackdown on dissent has reached the former Portuguese colony across the Pearl River delta, where authorities are set to test the tightened law with Au's prosecution.

The Macau court this month said a preliminary trial found Au was a "principal offender" and had committed crimes of "subversion of state power".



What saddens me the most is seeing him being portrayed as a villain by the very government that he served for so many years

Cherry Au, speaking of her father

The court said Au was suspected of "establishing links with organisations, groups or individuals outside Macau ... to commit acts endangering national security". Local police allege he had provided "a large amount of false and seditious information to an anti-China group" for public exhibitions online and abroad since 2022, and "stirred up hatred" against the Chinese government.

He was also accused of spreading false information to various groups, which disrupted the city's 2024 chief executive election and caused foreign countries to take hostile action against Macau, police say.

Au's family fears he was arrested for maintaining contact with foreign diplomats after he retired from politics, though they said there was nothing unusual about the meetings.

“What saddens me the most is seeing him being portrayed as a villain by the very government that he served for so many years. I hope people remember the person they knew throughout his career, the reason why they placed their trust in him and elected him time and again.

“Right now he is facing profound injustice. I hope those who remember his years of service will stand by him. We want a fair trial, due process, and for there to be more than three decades of dedication to the people of Macau, not to be erased or forgotten.”

Au is also a founding member of the Macau Union of Democratic Development, which organised annual candlelight vigils commemorating the Tiananmen Square massacre for almost 30 years. Beijing has banned public commemorations of the Tiananmen Square massacre, where at least 10,000 pro-democracy protesters were killed by the Chinese army.

The group disbanded in 2023 after years of government pressure and abuse braved by the organisers.

Unlike Hong Kong, which saw big social movements challenge Chinese Communist Party rule in 2014 and 2019, the democratic opposition in Macau has always existed on the fringes amid tight Chinese control.



A vigil at Liberty Square in Taipei on 4 June, commemorating the anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing

In March this year, lawmakers in Macau unanimously approved a bill allowing court proceedings to be held behind closed doors when deemed necessary to protect national security interests. The city enacted its first national security law in 2009 and tightened it with amendments in 2023.

Through the years, Au had led protests and railed against opaque governance and rising social inequalities even as gambling revenues exploded in the city of around 680,000.

Au's wife and two daughters remain in Macau. They have spoken to a social worker who visited Au, but received only limited updates. They were also told to pay 7,000 patacas or £650 to apply to challenge his detention, which was later rejected by Macau authorities.

“We don't know when these restrictions will be lifted,” Cherry says.

Au's family has urged the EU to use diplomatic pressure to secure his release. It is understood that the Portuguese consulate in Macau had requested consular access to Au, which was also

denied by the Chinese authorities. China does not recognise the concept of dual citizenship.

“This man doesn’t deserve to be in prison after decades, 30 years of working in the public service to help people who are in need and stand up for what’s right. There’s rarely a day that he wasn’t thinking about how he could make life better for the people he served,” Cherry says in her appeal to the EU.

“It is incredible; it’s so selfless. I can’t think of a man who has done more for the city than him throughout the decades. He’s an amazing dad as well. Most importantly, we must be allowed to visit him or at the very least communicate with him somehow, not through a social worker.”

Michael Polak, director of Justice Abroad, who has been helping the family, says Au’s arrest violated the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights that applied to Macau as well.

He says with the national security prosecution in Macau, “It seems like they are following the footsteps of Hong Kong. It’s a big mistake in relation to the reputation of Macau as somewhere where people can do business and people can discuss things.”

It is important to put Au’s case in the spotlight because otherwise they might just continue to hold him without trial, he adds.

“Portugal still sends judges to Macau. So if these kinds of extrajudicial cases are going to be brought, it’s not really a court process when you hold someone incommunicado without a lawyer of their own choosing. Then the Portuguese judges and Portuguese authorities need to consider whether they can continue to do that,” he says, urging the EU to raise Au’s case at the highest level.

Human Rights Watch previously said in a statement that Au’s arrest reflected “broadening repression” under the Chinese president.

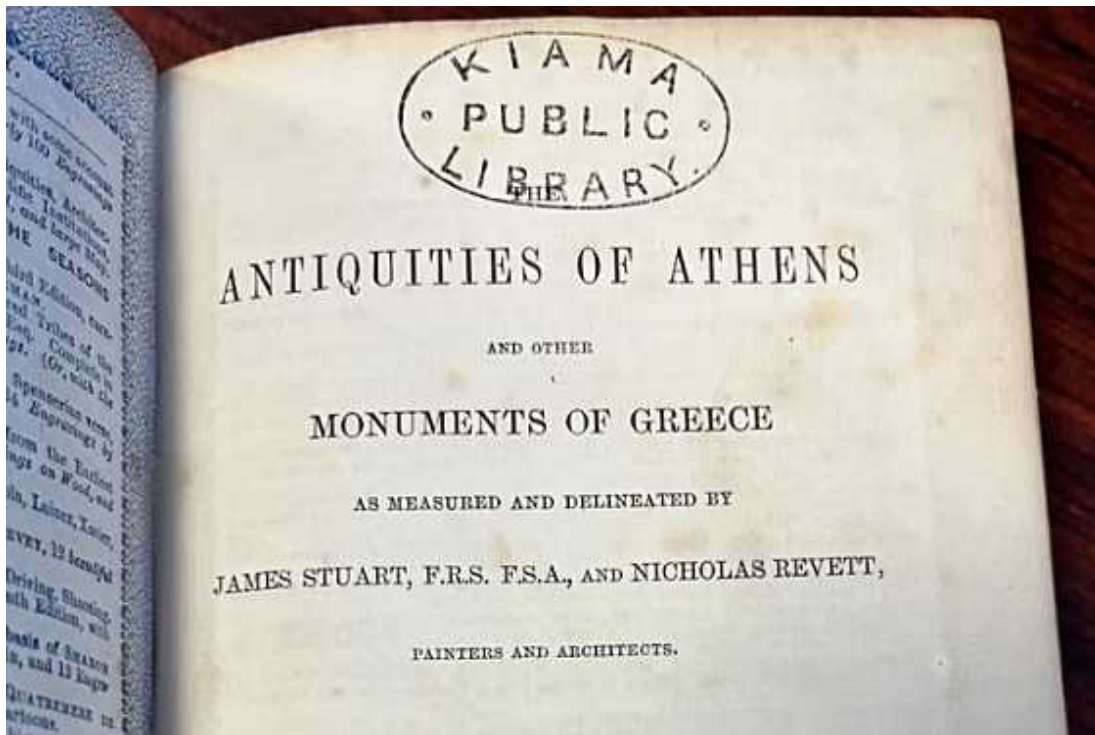
“Macau’s authorities should stop suppressing peaceful criticism and immediately and unconditionally free this activist and former legislator,” says Maya Wang, associate China director at the organisation.

The Independent has reached out to the Chinese embassy in London, the European Union, and the Portuguese consulate in Hong Kong and Macau for a statement.

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World news in brief



This book has just been returned to a library in Australia ... 150 years late (AP)

£14,600 fine for late return

A book has been returned to an Australian public library an estimated 150 years late after it was found in a sealed fireplace during recent home renovations. *Antiquities of Athens*, published in 1858, was returned to a library in the seaside town of Kiama.

“We’ve never had anything that old come back to us,” Kiama Library manager Michelle Hudson said. “I follow lots of libraries on social media, and often you’ll get things that are maybe 30 or 40 years old when they’re cleaning out estates and stuff like that,” she added.

The late return fine would be about AU\$28,000 (£14,600), allowing for inflation, Ms Hudson said. That was calculated on the British three pence-a-week overdue fee that was printed on the inside cover of the book, along with a list of rules that applied when the library opened in 1872.

The returned book will be displayed in the library's local history collection. "We're not going to allow it to go back out again. We don't want to wait another 150 years for this book to be returned," Ms Hudson said.

Police rescue 186 after river cruise runs aground

Police evacuated a cruise ship full of tourists this week after it ran aground on a dried-up Danube. The river receded to record lows along much of its course, exposing rocks, sand bars and old shipwrecks.

The low water level has forced popular cruise ships, where passengers usually disembark for sightseeing in Budapest, to dock far upriver, while cargo ships have stopped operating nearly entirely, according to Hungary's Ministry of Transport and Investment.

In Bulgaria police on Tuesday evacuated 186 tourists from a cruise ship that had run aground near the port city of Vidin. Passengers of the *Viking Ullur* ran out of food and water after the vessel was unable to reach Vidin after running into a shallow shoal, according to Bulgaria's state news agency BTA.

Japan earthquake death toll rises to 34

The death toll from the earthquake that struck southwest Japan on Tuesday has risen to 34. Crews were still searching the rubble yesterday in the Kumamoto region, on the southern main island of Kyushu, two days after the magnitude-6.8 quake.

At least 63 people were injured, five of them seriously and six in a critical condition, the Kumamoto prefectural government said. The number of people still missing was unclear. Chief cabinet secretary Minoru Kihara said some of the deaths were still being assessed to confirm whether they were caused by the quake.

More than 200 rescued from cars in Argentina

More than 200 people have been rescued from a 4,500 metre-high volcano viewpoint in Argentina after becoming trapped in a powerful snowstorm.

As the storm intensified, the tourists sought refuge inside their vehicles. Balcon del Pissis is a major tourist spot, boasting spectacular views of the Andes Mountains.

It took rescuers almost 24 hours to clear the snow and extract every trapped tourist, after the alarm was sounded on Tuesday afternoon. Two people were admitted to hospital with hypothermia. *AP*

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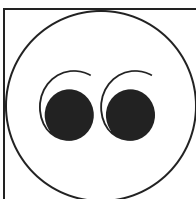


Prove your technical education revolution will work, Mr Burnham

Anthony Seldon praises the prime minister's vow to boost vocational studies in schools. But he says Andy Burnham must show drive – and provide extra cash – to make it successful



Burnham aims to give parity of esteem to academic and technical qualifications
(AFP/Getty)



In an education world where everything has to be scored to have value, I am awarding Andy Burnham's announcement this week 10 out of 10 for giving parity of esteem to academic and technical qualifications, while creating opportunities for 14-year-olds to gain skills and work experience.

Based on the Manchester Baccalaureate, or MBacc, which he introduced as mayor, it envisages a much greater role for local mayors and authorities in driving the initiative nationwide and draws on the experience of the Netherlands, which has a much lower school-leaver unemployment rate and denies young people benefits unless they have gained vocational qualifications.

Where Boris Johnson, as prime minister, sought to implement little of what he enacted during his eight years as London mayor, Burnham has come into No 10 with all guns blazing, drawing on his hyperactive nine years of executive leadership in Manchester.

Britain badly needs this adrenaline shot for its education system. The Times Education Commission handed a bold vision to the incoming Labour government for educational reform across schools, further education and higher education. Keir Starmer preferred instead to pick fights with state-school academy chains by denying them freedoms, and to attack independent schools by heaping on extra costs rather than mobilising them to support the state sector. There was no grand vision from No 10 for schools, technical education or universities.

If Burnham merits 10 out of 10 for his ambition on technical education, which he will flesh out in his 10-year plan in the autumn, he scores less highly on his utterances to date on how he will actually achieve it across the country. Virtually every prime minister since Winston Churchill in the 1950s has talked up technical education, drawing inspiration from Germany's apprenticeships and post-war vocational system. But little has been achieved. The most recent technical initiative, T-levels, introduced in 2020, has only been a patchy success.

To pull it off will require massive prime-ministerial drive. After announcing so many initiatives – more than any new prime minister in his first 10 days – and with social care reform clearly ranking higher, it is reasonable to ask whether Burnham's plan will be any more successful than those of his predecessors. It's

not enough just to declare that technical and academic education will have parity of esteem.

Parents, pupils and employers are not fools: they need to see that parity being acted out. Employers, too, will need massive encouragement to play ball when so much regulation is hindering their ability to take on apprentices. Burnham is rightly concerned by high levels of regional unemployment, but much of this is a demand-side issue requiring macroeconomic solutions rather than a supply-side lack of skilled labour. Without powerful national growth, nothing will happen, and the goodwill Burnham has generated will turn sour. It will require high funding levels, too.



The British government lags far behind governments in virtually every other developed country in its lack of leadership on AI in education and the economy

This change – not least the construction of specialist vocational classrooms and the recruitment of qualified teachers – will be colossal. Shifting money from the elderly to the young by ending the unsustainable triple lock on pensions will help generate the necessary funds.

Burnham's initiative requires the greatest development in its overall vision. The British government lags far behind governments in virtually every other developed country in its lack of leadership on AI in education and the economy. AI is accentuating existing problems in schools and universities, including the rise in mental health concerns, absenteeism, underachievement among the already disadvantaged, and poor preparedness for the future job market. The government's cack-handed and obtuse neglect of how to optimise AI is embarrassing and deeply damaging.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the most important speech on education delivered by a Labour prime minister – James Callaghan's address at Ruskin College, Oxford, which

sparked the “Great Education Debate”. Burnham could build on his announcement this week and his genuine zeal to see all flourish in schools by delivering a landmark address of similar stature before the end of the year.

It could draw heavily on the magnificent vision that has come out of the OECD and the International Baccalaureate, the two most respected and influential voices on education globally, for creating an education fit for the mid-21st century. The OECD model builds on the best of the existing system’s focus on deep knowledge and academic rigour for all, initiated by Michael Gove as education secretary from 2010.

But it goes much further in its determination to make all young people productive contributors to the economy and society through its human-flourishing education model in the age of AI, from cradle to grave. It places uniquely human attributes – intellect, skill, beauty, agency, character, creativity, empathy and endeavour – qualities that AI will never usurp – at the very heart of all learning.

Tony Blair is remembered for saying that “education, education, education” would be his three biggest priorities as prime minister. If Burnham were to enact the roadmap outlined by the OECD, his enduring impact on Britain would be immeasurably bigger.

Sir Anthony Seldon is working with the deviser of the OECD paradigm, Michael Stevenson, to introduce human flourishing at Wellington and across state schools

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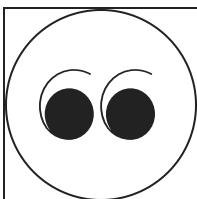


Boom! Labour's 3 per cent defence spending pledge is dead in the water

As the prime minister unveils a new generation of nuclear submarines with his chancellor John Healey and defence secretary Wes Streeting, the three are putting on a show of unity – but unless they can agree on a spending increase, all is lost, says **Sean O'Grady**



HMS Agamemnon nuclear submarine is seen docked at the BAE Systems factory in Barrow-in-Furness (*Getty*)



Dreadnought” is a great old nameplate. The original steam-propelled battleships were launched 120 years ago, with engines built in Barrow-in-Furness. They made all preceding warships obsolete, but were a costly project that competed with the welfare state for funding from the then Liberal government.

Plus ça change. A little more than a week after the mutineers cast Admiral Sir Keir Starmer adrift and took over the Royal Navy, the three leaders of the rebellion were at the Cumbrian port, surveying some of their most fearsome vessels – a new Dreadnought-class of submarines, destined to carry the British nuclear deterrent into the second half of the 21st century.

The new high admiral, Andy Burnham, his purser Commander John Healey, and chief petty officer Wesley “Wes” Streeting (formerly the medical orderly) took the salute, and what a magnificent bang for the £8.4bn buck the hard-pressed British taxpayer will be getting in the years ahead.

Indeed, our Labour sailors tell us that the plan is to “reindustrialise” Britain, and also bring jobs to Plymouth, Bristol, Rosyth, Derby and other places home to the fine tradition of marine engineering excellence and marginal parliamentary constituencies. Burnham sent the signal: “Keeping this country safe is the first responsibility of any government – but security is not only about what we build; it is about who builds it, and who benefits from it.”

Nelson himself couldn’t have put it better. Putin, Xi and the ayatollahs must be quaking in their shoes.

Or maybe not. During the speeches and their various media appearances, the seadogs went out of their way to avoid answering any questions about defence spending, the very issue that finally ejected Starmer from office.

You may recall that Burnham began his plotting to replace Starmer about a year ago, when the Labour backbenchers, “below decks” you might say, started objecting to Starmer’s welfare reforms. Burnham made sure they knew which side he was on. He was, if you will, playing Fletcher Christian to Starmer’s Captain William Bligh.



Britain expects, then, to see the ‘new’ government run by these pirates to commit itself to the 3 per cent figure by 2030. Well, they haven’t. Nor, we must suspect, will they even by the time of the next Budget

Then, after the local elections, Streeter abandoned his post and inadvertently opened the way for Burnham to make his final move on the leadership. But it was Healey’s resignation that finally breached the last of Starmer’s defences.

Do we remember what supposedly eventually turned Healey, the most loyal of the loyal, against Starmer? Of course we do. It was the weakness in defence spending. More specifically, it was Starmer’s and Rachel Reeves’s refusal to pledge that 3 per cent of national income would be devoted to armaments by 2030 – a point at which experts think war with Russia is a plausible scenario.

It was a grave matter of principle. Healey called into question the prime minister’s judgement, his integrity, even (though Healey wouldn’t go so far) his patriotism. The words must have hurt Starmer: “You have been unable, and the Treasury has been unwilling, to commit the resources that the nation needs to defend the country at this time of rising threats.”

Healey’s demand was made with great precision and no compromise: “Britain must set the headmark of spending 3 per cent on defence in 2030 and a clear path to 3.5 per cent in 2035 – the commitment all Nato nations have made to each other and to their people. I believe that this would command wide cross-party support.”

Britain expects, then, to see the “new” government run by these pirates to commit itself to the 3 per cent figure by 2030. Well, they haven’t. Nor, we must suspect, will they even by the time of the next Budget.

Now up on the bridge and in charge of their own *Bounty*, Burnham, Healey and Streeting are charting a course remarkably similar to that of Starmer and his first mate, Reeves, at least so far as the defence budget is concerned.

So we are left wondering: what was their mutiny for?

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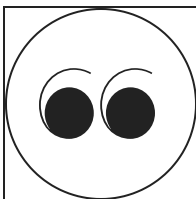


‘Guillotine’ retweet has tested the Green Party leader to self-destruction

Zack Polanski hoped to lead a political revolution on the left – but his handling of repeated controversies raises serious questions over his judgement, writes **John Rentoul**



Polanski refused to apologise for retweeting a guillotine threat against Nigel Farage
(Getty)



The plane has stalled, smoke is pouring out of the engine, the ground is coming up fast, and the pilot seems unequal to the task of pulling out of the tailspin. Zack Polanski is struggling with the controls as the Green Party is losing support.

He was elected leader 10 months ago on the bright and not entirely unrealistic prospectus of the Greens replacing Labour as the main party of the left. The party's support in opinion polls doubled from eight to 16 per cent. But since the local elections in May, that rise has been reversed, and there are questions to be asked about whether Polanski is up to the task of recovery.

His latest mistake was to share on Instagram a post of a man wearing a T-shirt with a picture of a guillotine and the slogan, "We're only making plans for Nigel." He had not noticed the words, with the implication of a threat to kill Nigel Farage, when he "flicked through" a series of 20 images, and as soon as this one was "brought to his attention", he immediately unshared it.

He was asked by Victoria Derbyshire on BBC Two's *Newsnight*: "Do you want to apologise?" Polanski said: "No."

He accepted that he had made an "inadvertent mistake", but he wasn't going to say sorry because Farage had drawn attention to the image and given it far wider currency. Besides, he said, the moment he apologised, "we all know what Nigel Farage would do" – he would "run around" all over social media saying that Polanski had admitted that the post was an incitement to murder, which he had not. "It is important that I draw a line and don't play his game," Polanski said.

It was also important to him that he stood up to newspapers "owned by billionaires that often attack me". He didn't think the photo was an incitement to murder, but he condemned violence – and violent imagery, and he personally always tried to avoid violent metaphors.

In the course of a 12-minute interview, he managed to contradict himself repeatedly. Sharing the post was a mistake, but "I don't think I have done anything wrong", he said. The outrage had been confected by his enemies, but "this is a legitimate conversation to be having", which is why he came on the programme.

And he accepted Derbyshire's description of his error as "careless at best and dangerous at worst". She went on to point out that he wanted to be prime minister: "Voters could be forgiven for thinking that potentially you might be careless or dangerous with their lives or their safety or their money. Is that fair?" He replied: "Yes."

He claimed that he would learn from his mistake, and would be "better on my social media" – while at the same time boasting that "other politicians don't use social media in the way that I do".



He has a surface plausibility, but is too ready to blame others and too proud to take meaningful responsibility for his mistakes and therefore to learn from them

Derbyshire seemed surprised. It was only in April, she pointed out, that he apologised for retweeting an X post accusing police of excessive force in tackling a knifeman terrorising Jews in Golders Green. He had not seemed to have learnt from that mistake. That was "totally different", Polanski insisted.

Nor are Polanski's mistakes confined to social media. Days earlier in April, he had appeared in an interview to play down Jewish fears of antisemitic attacks, saying, "There's a conversation to be had about whether it's a perception of unsafety or whether it's actual unsafety, but neither are acceptable."

The *Newsnight* interview suggested to me that Polanski lacks the skill and judgement to succeed in his job. He has a surface plausibility, but is too ready to blame others and too proud to take meaningful responsibility for his mistakes and therefore to learn from them.

He is similar to Jeremy Corbyn, not just in his politics but in his prickly belief in his own virtue. Yet he does not even have

Corbyn's basic skill of stonewalling difficult questions or turning them to homely expressions of universal peace and justice.

And now that Polanski is up against a Labour leader who is better at politics than he is, all he can do is sound self-pitying. He said to Derbyshire that Andy Burnham "has identified a lot of the problems I was talking about".

In other words, his dream of replacing the Labour Party is over. And the Green Party, which never really liked the idea of having a single leader anyway, may start to wonder about the airworthiness of a pilot who fails to learn from his mistakes.

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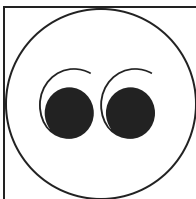


In tinderbox Britain, why are disposable barbecues still on sale?

It is beyond irresponsible that supermarkets are continuing to stock equipment known to start fires. We must learn to enjoy a picnic without setting our world alight, argues **Sophie Pavelle**



A disposable barbecue was responsible for the fire that destroyed a large part of Studland Heath in Dorset in 2022 (Getty/iStock)



Britain's summers have changed faster than our habits. As an “exceptionally serious drought” and wildfires spread across the country, we continue to market one of the most avoidable sources of ignition as the perfect accompaniment to a sunny afternoon: disposable barbecues.

England is now facing an “exceptional” wildfire risk, while firefighters battle blazes across the country – including in Suffolk and London, where flames have swept through tinder-dry landscapes. Reservoirs are shrinking, fields are turning brittle, and smoke is becoming part of summer’s skyline.

More than 250 blazes have ignited from north Wales to the Peak District, and from Surrey to Somerset and Devon. Entire villages have been evacuated in the Cairngorms National Park during one of its most devastating wildfires to date.

Even Wanstead Flats, the site of the largest grass fire ever recorded in the London area at the time, is reported to have caught fire again. As I write, a major wildfire is engulfing Dunwich Heath in Suffolk. A hundred firefighters are doing their best to contain a blaze that has grown tenfold in a matter of hours.

Catastrophe needs only a spark. A dropped cigarette, a firework, a discarded glass bottle magnifying the sun – or a coal from a disposable barbecue. Fanned by warm summer winds, a moment of carelessness can put everything ablaze.

Following four successive heatwaves since May has left Britain primed to burn. Scorch marks etch a chessboard across our most sensitive habitats – heathlands, moorlands and grasslands. From space, drought spreads across our isles like a tea stain. England’s wildfire risk has rarely been higher... and yet I can still buy a disposable BBQ for £3.

The aluminium kits are once again among the first things to greet me when I enter my local supermarket. Piled high, branded with urgency – “Barbequick”, “Instant Light” – they are designed to encourage impulse buying. It’s harder to buy paracetamol.

Retailers slash prices on charcoal and firelighters – “Grab the essentials”, make the most of a sunny afternoon. As if we need encouragement.

The last time Britain faced a red wildfire alert was in July 2022 – the same year several major supermarkets withdrew nationwide sales of disposable BBQs in recognition of the wildfire hazard and the significant landfill waste they create. Individual authorities introduced localised bans using Public Spaces Protection Orders (PSPOs).



BBQs are no longer simply symbols of summer. They evoke solastalgia – the heartache of environmental change, the grief of watching familiar places become unfamiliar

Disposable barbecues singe in an instant – as the black rectangles in every local park attest. Ash can stay hot for days. If abandoned, as on Scotland's Yellowcraig Beach last week, Grenoside Woods near Sheffield, or Wembury Head in South Devon – a cherished place for my family – landscapes once sculpted by ice and tectonics can melt into memory in hours, changed for years.

BBQs are no longer simply symbols of summer. Increasingly, they evoke solastalgia – the heartache of environmental change, the grief of watching familiar places become unfamiliar.

Wildfire is indiscriminate. In the Cairngorms, which harbour a quarter of our rarest and most endangered species, flames advance with appalling speed as communities rally to contain them. With a stone in my stomach, I think of the aspen trees I studied just two years ago in Abernethy Forest, which may now have been lost. Deep in the Caledonian forest floor, peat can continue burning downwards, smouldering for weeks and releasing carbon emissions that took centuries to bury.

A UK parliament petition calling for a ban on disposable BBQs remains active, but so far has collected fewer than 12,000 signatures. Until our leaders legislate, their fate lies with retailers and local authorities.

Advice on the safe use and disposal of barbecues is scattered, inconsistent and easily ignored. Public messaging does not match the scale of the danger unfolding. When landscapes are drying out and fires are spreading, who is listening?

Humans have depended on fire for around 1.5 million years; its attraction is irresistible. Fire has shaped our brains, sparked language and inspired culture. It flickers in our bones. Lately, I have been dreaming of it.

Retailers have a responsibility to address fire's deadly magnetism by taking disposable BBQs, lights and fuels off the shelf, in store and online. How can profit be derived from products that kindle the landscapes we love and threaten the future we take for granted?

We must learn to enjoy a picnic without setting the world alight.

Sophie Pavelle is an award-winning author and science communicator. Her latest book, 'To Have or To Hold: Nature's Hidden Relationships', is published by Bloomsbury, £10.99

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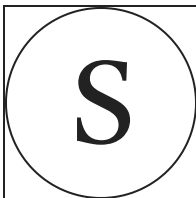


‘The Russians treated us like animals. They did not consider us humans’

An extraordinary new documentary, ‘Can I Go Home Now?’, gives Ukrainian children the chance to tell their own stories of war, forced deportation and survival. Their testimony lays bare the devastating human cost of Russia’s invasion, reports **Mark Hollingsworth**



More than 19,500 Ukrainian children have been forcibly taken to Russia or its territory, with a small minority of them being returned since then – the documentary seeks to tell their story (*Photos Cinessaince*)



ofia is an 11-year-old Ukrainian girl with scars on her face and light brown hair in a ponytail. When Russian troops entered her village, she recalls what happened vividly.

“They took the 16-year-old girls to their place,” she recounts tearfully. “When the girls came back, their clothes were torn. Everything was torn. The Russians behaved badly with those girls. Everyone was panicking. We didn’t know what to do, where to go. The Russians came to my house. They checked my

toys, my hairpins, and my clothes ... They threatened my parents. They had weapons. If you say anything, they might kill you.”

The alleged sexual assaults of young girls are one of the shocking accounts in an extraordinary new documentary about the experiences of Ukrainian children during the five-year-long Russian invasion.

Entitled *Can I Go Home Now?* and viewed by *The Independent* on an exclusive basis, the film contains interviews with Ukrainian boys and girls; no adult voices are present.

Produced and directed by Pritan Ambroase, a 35-year-old philanthropist and former owner of the *Hollywood Insider*, the film was made with help from humanitarian charities who gave access to 500 children.



Sofia: ‘When the girls came back, their clothes were torn ... If you say anything, they might kill you’

Having previously made a documentary focusing on private prisons in the US, Ambroase made multiple perilous visits to Ukraine by flying to Poland and then by car to Lviv and train to Kyiv to document their harrowing stories from a war where it is estimated Ukraine has endured between 525,000 and 625,000 casualties, including 125,000 and 150,000 fatalities.

Millions of Ukrainian children have fled their homes since Russia’s full-scale invasion began in 2022. In 2025, Ukrainian

authorities said more than 19,500 have been unlawfully deported or forcibly transferred to Russia or Russian-occupied territory, with only a fraction returned to their families.

During his visits, Ambroase heard heartbreaking testimonies to a relentless soundtrack of explosions, missiles and buildings collapsing daily. Determined that the youngsters' stories should be heard, he battled fears for his own safety and chose 15 youngsters to tell their stories on camera to Ukrainian journalist Tetiana Popova, who had done much vital reporting on the deportation of Ukrainian children.

He remembers: "My biggest concern was for the children who had been rescued from Russia and were being filmed a week after arriving in Ukraine. It was all very fresh and raw. And so I had this dilemma: am I doing the right thing by making children speak about what they went through? I spoke to multiple therapists who all said it was better for them to talk than keep it inside."



The doctors tried to save my leg, but it didn't work, and so they had to cut it off. When the doctors changed the bandages, it was very painful. There was a shrapnel wound

Sasha, 6

One child is filmed performing as a ballerina, and another girl stares down the barrel of a tank's gun, handing a flower to a soldier. Six-year-old Sasha's dreams of being a gymnast were shattered when a missile exploded in her house. She was hit directly; a slab of concrete fell on her left leg and taken to hospital. She woke up from a coma to discover she had lost a leg, an arm and hearing in one ear.

"The doctors tried to save my leg, but it didn't work, and so they had to cut it off," she recalls. "When the doctors changed the bandages, it was very painful. There was a shrapnel wound. I was very scared and crying. I wouldn't be able to live like normal people, to walk and practice gymnastics."

Sasha's parents wept on seeing her amputated leg, but she remains defiant. "When I grow up, I want to be a gymnastics coach and go to the Olympic Games," she said. "I would say to the terrorists [Russians], stop shooting. We didn't do anything bad to you, but you waged a war on us."

Focusing on the voices of the children brings its own power. As does the silence of the voices that we are still waiting to hear from.

Only 2,000 of forcibly taken children have been reunited with their families; thousands of others have been placed in camps in Russia where they undergo military-style training and are indoctrinated with propaganda about the war.



Pritan Ambroase chose 15 children to recount their own horrific stories

Horribly, some children have been coerced into adoption with new Russian families. There is credible evidence from the UN and other sources that Russian authorities have issued Russian birth certificates and citizenship documents in occupied Ukrainian territories, with some deported Ukrainian children given new identities, including Russian names, as part of adoption or foster placement. Charities deploy specialised teams to travel to Russia at great personal risk to retrieve and escort children back to their desperate families.

One 16-year-old boy, Vitaly, recalls what happened when his family tried to leave their city in eastern Ukraine. “The Russians told us if we drove through their checkpoint, they would shoot us,” he recalled. “Some people tried to go through it and were shot on the spot.”

Vitaly was taken after his mother signed papers under duress by Russian soldiers for her son to attend a “summer camp”.

“I ended up in Russia,” he said. “We were promised we were going to a camp like the Bahamas. My Mum came to pick me up, but she was late. The gates were closed. They told her the children were taken to Svatovo. She screamed and yelled, but we were put on a ship.



There were about 500 children at the camp between the ages of five and 18. They made us work. We got sick many times, but there was no medical care

Vitaly, 16

“For three days the ships carried children there. One ship could carry 1,000 people. As we entered the port, we saw barbed wire on the fence. The Russians said everything would be perfect. But as you enter the camp, it’s the polar opposite.

“There was no fire, the electricity did not work, no hot water, virtually no heating. Everything was dirty, soiled and black. We slept on mattresses on the floor. There was one shower and two toilets,” Vitaly explains.

“There were about 500 children at the camp between the ages of five and 18. They made us work. We got sick many times, but there was no medical care.

“I was worried I would never go home again. The Russians yelled at us all the time, calling us ‘hohol’ and ‘ukrop’ [ethnic slurs for Ukrainians] and said we were mentally ill. They forced us to learn and sing the Russian national anthem, but we refused. It

was all Russian propaganda. When we said, ‘Crimea is Ukraine’, they put us in solitary confinement in the basement. They treated us like animals. They did not consider us humans.”

One of Vitaly’s fellow inmates, Olya, was assaulted in the basement by a Russian teacher for shouting “Glory to Ukraine”.



Buried dreams: one child tells the story of her gymnastic aspirations crushed under the weight of rubble from a missile strike

“He beat her with a metal rod, swearing at her, saying he will slaughter her,” Vitaly recalls. “She showed me her blue bruises on her back. We were distressed. You could hear five-year-old kids constantly crying, begging to go home. I tried to hide my tears. I thought I would never go back home.”

After seven months at the camp, he was released by the Russians. “When I saw my mother, I almost broke the gates and I started crying,” he said.

Back in Ukraine, the children have also suffered directly from the bombing of their homes. “We were all thrown back by the blast wave,” recalled Sofia, who was bombed throughout 2022 in her hometown.

“I woke up in a pit. I couldn’t move at all as I was under the concrete slabs. I didn’t have enough air. I was covered with rubble. I was scared and I thought I would die and no one would

rescue me. I swallowed the soil and half of my hair was left in there.

“The police dug me out and transferred me to the emergency hospital. I had swallowed shrapnel in my stomach and so they put me in intensive care where they did surgery. The missile left three scars on my cheek, behind my ear and on my back... I always put on a mask when I go outside. I am not beautiful with these scars.”



I woke up in a pit. I couldn't move at all as I was under the concrete slabs ... I swallowed the soil and half of my hair was left in there

Sofia, 11

She remains in her hometown, but her grandmother has since died, and her mother has spent much of the war in hospital. It is heartbreaking to bear witness to so many shattering losses of war. Yuriy, 16, and his father were travelling on their bikes to deliver food to Bucha for old people when a Russian soldier stopped them.

“He asked us where we were going. I told him we were delivering food. My father walked towards me and then shots rang out. My father fell and the soldier aimed at me. He shot my hand twice and I fell too. I turned on my stomach. I then heard two more shots as I lay down. I felt one and the other hit my father.

“I turned my head and saw my father lying in a pool of blood. I reached out to his body but I was shot again. The Russians thought I was dead and told my mother what happened.

“The next day my grandma arrived with a wheelbarrow and Ukrainian soldiers helped her take my father's body and we buried him in the yard. My clothes were soaked with blood. I told my mum not to go there because it was too dangerous. But she went there anyway.”

What Ambroase had not anticipated was the emotional impact after filming for 30 days of filming and travelling 1,000km in 10 different cities. “During the interviews, I took off my headphones and left the room. It was too much,” he said, adding that he was diagnosed and treated with post-traumatic stress after returning to the US.

Reflecting on so many childhoods stolen, he said. “I cannot forgive crimes against children. This film is a revolution against war and hatred.”

‘Can I Go Home Now?’ is produced by Cinessaince Motion Pictures Inc and the Humans of our World Foundation



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On this day



Wife-killer Dr Hawley Crippen was arrested thanks to the use of wireless telegraphy on this day in 1910 (Getty)

1485: *Morte D'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory was published. He wrote the tale of knightly love and chivalry while in prison for armed assault and rape.

1635: British public inland postal services were established, with charges of two to eight pence.

1910: Wife-poisoner Dr Hawley Crippen was arrested on the SS *Montrose* as it was entering Quebec. He had left his dismembered wife in a cellar in his London home and was travelling with Ethel le Neve, his mistress, who was dressed as a boy. Crippen was the first criminal to be captured by the use of wireless telegraphy.

1912: The world's first film censorship law was passed in the United States. It was not against obscenity but the interstate transportation of films showing prize fights.

1919: The Weimar Republic was established with a new constitution in postwar Germany.

1956: At Old Trafford, England bowler Jim Laker took all 10 Australian wickets in the second innings for 53 runs, after a first innings haul of nine for 37.

1964: Jim Reeves, American country singer, was killed when the single-engine Beechcraft Debonair he was flying crashed outside Nashville, Tennessee.

1965: The last cigarette advert ran on British TV, before a government ban came into force.

1975: Irish five-piece The Miami Showband were ambushed and three were shot dead by loyalist paramilitaries at Buskhill, Co Down.

1988: The last Playboy club in the US closed in Lansing, Michigan.

2010: A four-strong British rowing team smashed a 114-year-old record for crossing the North Atlantic. Their time – 43 days, 21 hours, 26 minutes and 48 seconds – knocked 11 days off the previous 55-day record set in 1896 by Norwegian fishermen George Harbo and Frank Samuelsen.

2012: Michael Phelps broke the record for the most medals won at the Olympic Games, with his 19th, including his 15th gold.

On this day last year: Conor McGregor lost his appeal against a civil jury's finding in favour of Dublin woman Nikita Hand, who accused him of rape. The MMA fighter lost his appeal on all five grounds on which the case was taken.

Birthdays

Geraldine Chaplin, actress, 82; **Jonathan Dimbleby**, broadcaster, 82; **Evonne Cawley**, former tennis player, 75; **Andrew Marr**, journalist, broadcaster and political commentator, 67; **Wesley Snipes**, actor, 64; **Norman Cook**, record producer (aka Fat Boy Slim), 63; **JK Rowling**, author, 61; **Dean Cain**, actor,

60; **Emilia Fox**, actress, 52; **Will Champion**, drummer (Coldplay), 48; **Victoria Azaranka**, tennis player, 36.

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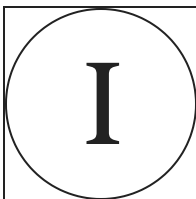


Stop, this isn't funny any more

In the latest bleak swing of the axe, the beleaguered BBC has cut 'Live at the Apollo' after 22 years on air. This is devastating for the future of British comedy, writes **Nick Hilton**



Dara O Briain hosting 'Live at the Apollo', which has just been cancelled by the BBC
(BBC/Open Mike)



Is there any organisation in the country as addicted to its own destruction as the BBC? It feels like every day there is another news story about the Beeb – one of the world's most venerable legacy media corporations – demonstrating a total lack of institutional confidence. Channels shuttered, programmes ditched, staff culled: the BBC is being drawn into a permanent cycle of self-flagellation.

Matt Brittin, the new director general, has been tasked with creating a modern, streamlined BBC, one capable of withstanding political scrutiny as it heads into next year's charter renewal. As part of this restructure, the organisation is looking to shed £100m of budget assigned to "content".

In recent weeks, we've seen Radio 4's flagship *Today* programme slimmed down, and the demise, after 57 years, of *The World Tonight*. And while the schedule is being brutally cleared, the BBC is also attempting to bridge the perceived shortfall between the estimated 94 per cent of adults who use the BBC and the 80 per cent who actually pay for the licence fee.

Every World Cup game was incongruously watermarked with a QR code for licence renewal, while an updated version of John Cleese's famous "what has the BBC ever done for me?" advert, featuring Romesh Ranganathan slow-rapping his way toward a giant lever to turn the BBC "off" (operated, naturally, by Louis Theroux), felt misjudged. Now, the axe has thus fallen on three TV institutions: the Bradley Walsh-hosted reboot of *Blankety Blank*, *Celebrity Mastermind*, and *Live at the Apollo*.

There will not be much consternation about the first two. Since it relaunched in 2021, *Blankety Blank* has run for 44 episodes, bringing the total archive for the series to 258 shows. That's enough to provide daytime telly reruns for longer than its viewers' memories. Similarly, *Celebrity Mastermind*, which still has a pre-filmed season to air, has broadcast 209 episodes since its birth in 2002. There will be plenty of people within the BBC who think that constitutes a good run for such a simple format. But *Live at the Apollo* is a different beast – and its cancellation is a bleak portent of the BBC's future.



BBC stars Jesse Armstrong and Nish Kumar (Getty)

When it began life in 2004, hosted by Jack Dee, the show was designed as a showcase for some of the world's funniest live comics, like Joan Rivers, Jo Brand and Ross Noble. But by the fourth series, in 2008, the show had evolved into something else. It paired big names from British comedy with rising stars. For the next 18 years, *Live at the Apollo* would be seen as a rite of passage for comics looking to break through from Edinburgh Fringe success to the lucrative mainstream. Sarah Millican, Jack Whitehall, Josh Widdicombe, Nish Kumar, Katherine Ryan, Aisling Bea... many of the current crop of household names got some of their first primetime experience on the show.

The UK used to be the world's leading shipbuilder, then we gave up on that. We used to sell cars – Rovers and Triumphs and Morris – all over the world, then they went bust. We used to be a top global financial hub and then, well, you know what happened. But one export we've held onto is comedy. And the BBC has been the great incubator of British comedy, from *Fawlty Towers* to *The Office*.

The ethos of the BBC's comedy programming was historically driven by a desire to set the tone of British humour. Talented young comics were given opportunities in sketches and sitcoms,

with taste-making producers commissioning on instinct, rather than by algorithm. Spike Milligan, Monty Python, Fry & Laurie and French & Saunders, Ben Elton and Steve Coogan and Armando Iannucci and Jesse Armstrong, Ricky Gervais and Phoebe Waller-Bridge and Michaela Coel: these were all big swings taken by our national broadcaster.



Phoebe Waller-Bridge in her BBC smash-hit 'Fleabag' (BBC/Two Brothers)

Increasingly, however, it feels like the opportunities for young and new comedians to make that step up to television work are being stifled. The risk appetite of the organisation has never been lower. This has been compounded by the rise of comedy podcasting, which represents a decentralised platform for comedians to publish their work. Some of these shows – *Off Menu*, *Parenting Hell*, *Shagged Married Annoyed* – are far more lucrative for their hosts than anything the BBC can offer them. There is a sense that where previously an appearance on *Live at the Apollo* represented a real professional breakthrough, it would now be massively superseded by a guest slot on one of these private-sector podcasts.

But there is a real danger in the BBC recusing itself from innovation in comedy. These podcast formats are enjoyable but derivative. Whether it is the manic satire of *The Day Today*, the

charming grotesquery of *The League of Gentlemen*, or the warm embrace of *This Country*, the BBC has always invested in the next big thing.

Its current big hit – *Ann Droid* – was written by, and stars, Diane Morgan, a deadpan comedian who made her breakthrough on *Live at the Electric*, a BBC Three spin-off of *Live at the Apollo*. That show was cancelled in 2014, and two years later BBC Three was closed as a linear channel (it returned in 2022 but with vanishingly little original programming). Viewers are lucky that Diane Morgan made it out of *Live at the Electric*, onto *Charlie Brooker's Weekly Wipe*, and then, eventually, to *Ann Droid*. But we may not be so lucky with the next wave of comedians.

Comedy is one of Britain's last great soft power resources. Losing that in pursuit of cost efficiencies would be a crying shame. The BBC must make a positive argument for its existence, rather than shrinking like a dying houseplant. Sure, clear out long-running formats that don't provide value for viewers, but don't hobble our chances of being the world's funniest nation for generations to come.

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Plenty of blood, scares and despair, but the full horrors are kept at arm's length

★★★★☆

Late playwright Sarah Kane's shocking 1998 work 'Cleansed' is revived at the Almeida Theatre, in a production that's both unexpectedly maximalist and surprisingly gentle

Alice Saville



Pearl Chanda has an acidic sense of humour as Grace in 'Cleansed' (*Marc Brenner*)

A favoured coping strategy of squeamish theatregoers like myself is to remember that nothing they're seeing – however stomach-churningly violent – is real. All that blood is just a syrupy-sweet concoction of glycerine and food colouring, ready to be scrubbed off in the wings with scented baby wipes before the actors go home to hug their loved ones, wounds erased and missing body parts restored. Wimps will almost certainly be warned off Sarah Kane's merciless 1998 classic *Cleansed* by the baroque elaboration of the trigger warnings that accompany it, reeling off every possible variation of torture. But if not, Almeida regular Rebecca Frecknall's production extends a sympathetic hand to nervous audiences. Blood is stored in sandwich bags before it anoints body parts: flaming paper is dropped immediately into a fire-proof bucket. These self-conscious, Brechtian touches combine with stylised movement sequences to create a production that holds Kane's full horrors at arm's length, without stinting on utter despair.

Nearly three decades after *Cleansed* was written, it's still vanishingly rare to find a play like it – one that's structured around metaphor rather than narrative, and is unafraid to confront an audience with ambiguous, horrible images and let them scramble to understand them. According to the stage directions, it's set in a university. But really, this is a sinister institution that satirises the unsparing treatment of those who have broken society's rules – the illiterate, the drug addicts, the incestuous, the homosexuals. If anyone's in charge, it's the monstrous Tinker (Leo Bill), a man who barks and snarls like a dog as he cuts off the inmates' extremities. But he issues regular reminders that none of this is up to him.

Frecknall's production seems to be haunted by a greater evil: an invisible force that hurls these suffering people into walls until their heads bleed, in agonisingly effective moments of physical theatre. Grace (Pearl Chanda) has come to this cursed place in search of her brother, Graham (Jack Riddiford). When she finds out he's dead, she tries to reckon with her grief by becoming him – wearing his clothes, suffering like he did. In Kane's twisted

worldview, to love is to choose unimaginable pain. A gay couple tentatively flirt with commitment in an early scene: Rod (a cynical Parth Thakerar) won't give a ring to Carl (the winsome Luke Cinque-White), because he can't believe that love is stronger than suffering and death. He turns out to be right, but that can't save them from agony upon agony, rendered in horrific detail.



Stuart Thompson brings an innocence to proceedings as Robin

There are moments of lightness here. Stuart Thompson's standout performance as naive, boyish Robin brings an innocence to proceedings, as he dances delicately through a world that's as bloody as a ballerina's pointe shoe. And Chanda has an acidic sense of humour that bubbles up in odd moments, pointing out the absurdity of this whole contrivance. Joy glows and surges out of this mess like nuclear radiation – a field of fake yellow flowers blooms and the mellow sound of The Kinks drowns out all the screaming, for a while.

All in all, this is an unexpectedly maximalist production, as well as a surprisingly gentle one. George Dennis's accomplished sound design is transporting, evoking a sinister monastery in chanted pentatonic scales, or a distortion-rocked Nineties rave, or a trite music therapy session wherein broken voices cry out an

old pop song. And Madeleine Girling's set feels like a cinema screen that gets broken apart, smashing out of the limiting generic conventions of a horror flick into something wilder and weirder.

Still, maybe Kane suits a more pared-back approach, one that lets her message cut like a knife. This play is a brothel, a psychiatric institution, a torture chamber, a twisted party. But it's also nowhere at all, and it's that purgatorial abstraction that captures the utter hopelessness of her conviction that love burns you, then deserts you, leaving nothing but a pile of smouldering embers in a wasteland.

Until 29 August

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Why isn't the defining album of 2025 on the Mercury Prize shortlist?

Lily Allen's brilliant, brutally honest comeback record was all we could talk about last year, so the glaring absence of 'West End Girl' feels like a genuine shock, writes **Roisin O'Connor**



Olivia Dean, Florence and the Machine, Suede and Paul McCartney are on the Mercury Prize shortlist... but no Lily Allen (centre) (Getty/iStock)



When you think of the album that everyone was talking about last year, only one springs to mind: Lily Allen's eviscerating marriage post-mortem *West End Girl*. It's the album that lit up WhatsApp groups around the country, made jaws drop with the sheer bluntness of it all, and may just have inspired more than one woman to ditch their husband. So why, I want to know, is it not on this year's Mercury Prize shortlist?

The snubbing of the British pop artist's career-best work – a blistering, jaw-dropping, skin-pinchingly brutal narrative of a marriage in freefall – is one of the industry's most spectacular fumbles in some time. Especially when it comes to women in music, the UK has a depressing reputation for failing to champion its own artists until they're a success elsewhere. But Allen being left out is especially surprising, given it was one of the most critically lauded records of 2025, charting at No 2 in the UK and nominated for Album of the Year at the 2026 Brit Awards.

West End Girl was also *the* discourse for weeks if not months around its release thanks to its raw studies of non-monogamy, infidelity, betrayal, sexual rejection, loneliness, gaslighting and, erm, more betrayal. With the exception of Rosalía's *Lux* and Olivia Rodrigo's *You Seem Pretty Sad For a Girl So in Love*, neither of which were eligible for the Mercury Prize, *West End Girl* is the album that dissects all of our anxieties around the idea of the "modern" relationship and lays them out on the mortuary slab.

Just think of the perky opener "West End Girl", in which Allen lays out her scene. She's just won the lead in a play, she's packing her bags! But she closes with a subdued phone conversation: her partner wants an open relationship. Then comes the suspicion of "Tennis" as she unwittingly sees an incriminating text; her squaring up to "Madeline" ("how long has it been going on?"), the mental health spiral of "Ruminating". These were songs that became TikTok memes, Instagram profiles, and Halloween costumes. The "bewildered and wounded" Allen delivered, as

critic Hannah Ewens said in her five-star review for *The Independent*, an “emotional post-mortem carried out in public, a death-by-a-million-cuts account of a thoroughly modern marriage breakdown”. It was perfect.



Allen performing ‘West End Girl’ on tour (Getty)

So how does a snub like this happen? Artists and their teams submit themselves for the prize, so there is always the possibility that Allen didn’t put herself forward. Given she was previously shortlisted for her 2018 album, *No Shame*, though, I find that hard to believe, given her evident pride in making such a masterpiece in just 10 days, and her joy at the rapturous reception it received. The shortlist is chosen by a panel of industry “experts”, among them critics, radio DJs and musicians who have, in recent years, strayed towards more commercial picks.

Shortlisted this year are Olivia Dean’s breakthrough album *The Art of Loving* (she was also nominated for her 2023 debut, *Messy*), *The Boy Who Played the Harp* by former winner Dave, JADE’s debut solo album *That’s Showbiz, Baby*, and RAYE’s *This Music May Contain Hope*. Paul McCartney received his first nomination for *The Boys of Dungeon Lane*, while Britpop stalwarts Suede are up for what many critics felt was a late-

career high, *Antidepressants*. All very safe picks while, perhaps, Allen's album was too knotty for some of the judges?

One glaring throughline for many of these shortlisted albums is that they are cases of the artist (or band) doing what they're good at. Dave is deep and introspective, McCartney is sweetly nostalgic, Florence and the Machine are witchy and at gale-force volume. They do all of that very well. But in terms of artistic achievement, a case of an artist putting everything they had on the line, Allen was someone who really went there. She demonstrated how far she's come from the bratty, day-glo-eyeliner-wearing artist we grew up with (and loved). Failing to acknowledge her for that feels like a real self-own.

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Bank holds interest rates at 3.75% – but raise this year is ‘not off the table’

Karl Matchett Business and money editor



Bank of England governor Andrew Bailey's message is that domestic inflation looks manageable for now (Getty)

The Bank of England (BoE) has held interest rates at 3.75 per cent once more, despite an expectation of climbing inflation in the coming months.

Rates have been maintained at this level since December of last year but there is now widespread speculation that they will rise again later this year, largely driven by the impacts of the Iran war.

The BoE's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) voted 6-3 in favour of a hold this time, highlighting both the number of dissenters and the overall acceptance that rates will head upwards.

Rising fuel costs, as a direct consequence of the conflict in the Middle East, impacts the price of production, manufacturing, energy and transport. Raising interest rates is the Bank's primary tool to try to counter that and prevent inflation spiralling out of control.

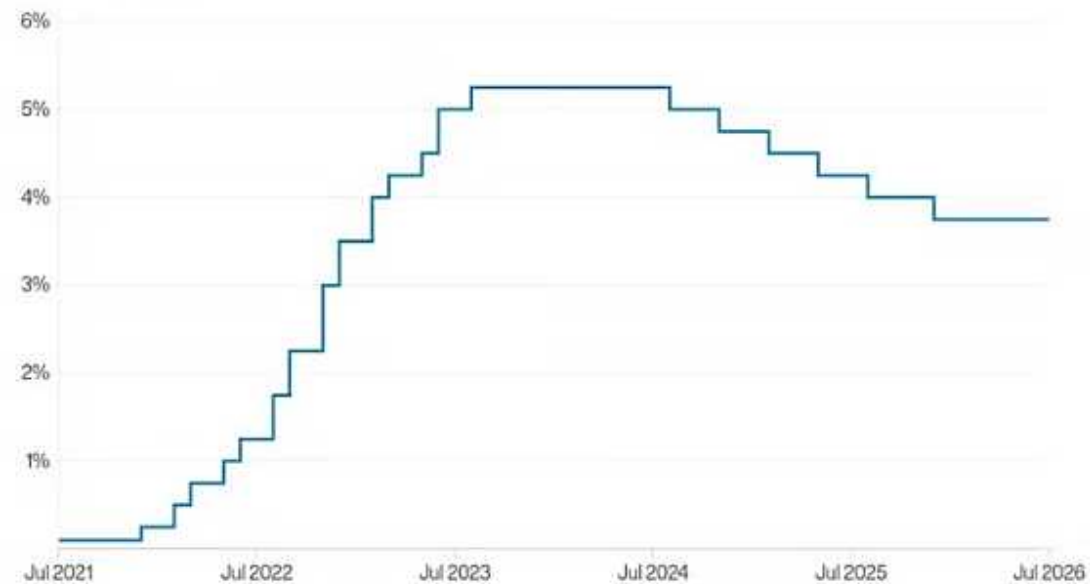
However, the reluctance to raise rates too early can be explained by the UK's extremely slow economic growth, unemployment hovering around 5 per cent and a property market which has stuttered over the past year. Millions of homeowners have moved off mortgage deals signed when interest rates were far lower, meaning repayments are considerably higher now.

Yesterday's MPC meeting highlighted that a loose labour market will go some distance toward taming inflation over time, while also noting there was "little evidence so far to suggest" that second-round effects of inflation – higher prices and wages, effectively – were taking place.

However, a telling note also cautioned that "risks to the inflation outlook are tilted to the upside" compared to its July meeting and that "there remains scope for the outlook to change materially as events in the Middle East unfold". The committee was also unanimous in its view that the risk of oil increasing in price for a longer period was more likely than the hoped-for scenario of a fall.

The three MPC members who voted to raise rates now all highlighted the fact that inflation has been above the 2 per cent government target for more than five years and added that a pre-emptive move to hike them could be less damaging in the long run. It cited research which showed "setting policy as if there were stronger second-round effects and course-correcting if needed, would prove to be less costly than vice versa".

UK interest rates



PA interactive graphic Source: Bank of England

Bank of England holds interest rates as energy prices set to lift inflation (*BofE*)

Despite that, analysts are still split over whether the BoE will eventually act.

Frances Haque, chief economist at Santander UK, hinted at the prospect of the base rate remaining at 3.75 per cent throughout 2026, pending geopolitical matters.

“Although both global and domestic challenges remain, there certainly seems to be signs of cautious optimism trickling into the mortgage market. More borrowers are choosing to play the waiting game, with growing interest in tracker mortgages as customers hope to benefit from any future reductions in borrowing costs,” she noted.

“Generally, this ‘wait and see’ approach is here to stay, with our latest forecasts assuming no further cuts to the Bank Rate in 2026. However, as inflation is expected to fall back as we enter into next year, we should see two further cuts across 2027.”

Rob Morgan, chief investment analyst at Charles Stanley Direct, agreed the direction of travel could continue to be sideways for some time – if energy markets can stabilise.

“Unfortunately for households and businesses feeling the heat, the Bank faces an awkward balancing act, highlighted by the

split in the MPC voting. Rate cuts are impossible to justify so long as inflation risks loom large on the horizon, while quelling it with a rate rise would increase borrowing costs and make things even harder for large parts of the economy,” he said.

“Provided energy markets remain contained, the most likely outcome is a prolonged pause at the current 3.75 per cent. Policymakers are seeing some encouraging signs that inflationary pressures will moderate once the coming flare-up passes.



Whether rates rise is highly dependent on whether energy markets stabilise in the coming months (AFP/Getty)

“But until they are more confident that higher energy costs will not ignite wider price escalation or feed into wage demands, interest rate cuts are on ice, and the possibility of a raise is not off the table.”

Sam North, eToro’s market analyst, agreed there was less ground to cover now for a hike to be considered. “Governor Andrew Bailey’s message is that domestic inflation looks manageable for now, but the global backdrop is becoming more dangerous,” he said. “The uncomfortable part is that the majority wants to wait for evidence of second-round effects, while three members

believe that waiting for them to appear could mean acting too late. The threshold for a hike has clearly fallen.”

For savers, Finder’s personal finance expert Kate Steere urged people to make the most of the gap between interest rates and inflation.

“Savers shouldn’t miss the bigger picture: real returns are back. With inflation at 2.6 per cent, market-leading cash ISAs from providers like Trading 212 (4.51 per cent) and Plum (4.4 per cent) are offering returns nearly 2 per cent above inflation,” she said. “That means cash value isn’t just being protected from inflation – it’s actively growing. With rates already dropping slightly, now is the time to take advantage before these strong offers slip away.”

Propertymark CEO Nathan Emerson added: “A stable base rate provides greater certainty for the housing market. It gives lenders more confidence to continue offering competitive mortgage products while allowing buyers to make informed financial decisions. Savers also continue to benefit from relatively attractive returns on savings, helping some prospective homeowners build towards a deposit.”

Looking ahead to the rest of the year, Kathleen Brooks, research director at XTB, notes that markets, which can diverge notably from economists or analysts, maintained expectations of a move to 4 per cent by winter, and possibly as soon as the next meeting – though the date of John Healey’s first Budget as chancellor could impact that.

“The interest rate futures market is pricing in two rate cuts in the next year, and there is currently a 52 per cent chance of a rate hike in September, and a 56 per cent chance of a hike in November,” she said. “We think that November is more likely, if the BoE is still considering a rate hike at that stage, since by that time the committee will have a better idea about 2027 pay awards, and the Budget should have been announced, which will give the MPC a clearer idea of the new PM’s economic policy.”



Business news in brief



Rolls-Royce has announced profits well above previous expectations (Getty)

BAE Systems and Rolls-Royce boosted by wars

Higher defence spending amid global conflicts is delivering a boost to Rolls-Royce and BAE Systems as the FTSE 100 stalwarts upgraded their annual outlooks after solid half-year figures. The engine maker Rolls-Royce now expects to post underlying operating profits of £4.7bn–£4.9bn for 2026, well above previous guidance. The group is benefiting from greater civil aerospace demand and AI data centre rollouts, which are helping its power systems division.

The defence contractor BAE Systems hiked its profit outlook, with a 10–12 per cent rise in underlying earnings expected for 2026, up from the 9–11 per cent previously forecast. Underlying earnings rose 11 per cent in the half-year on sales 9 per cent higher, while pre-tax profits rose to £1.28bn from £1.19bn a year ago.

Charles Woodburn, BAE's chief executive, recently warned that defence spending in the UK still "falls well short" of what is required.

Jaguar Land Rover to cut hundreds of jobs

Jaguar Land Rover (JLR) has announced plans to cut hundreds of jobs as part of a major transformation. This decision follows the group's ongoing recovery from a major cyber attack that halted production last year, compounded by US tariff measures.

Fewer than 300 roles are understood to be affected at the UK's largest car manufacturer. JLR, employing around 30,000 in the UK and 10,000 abroad, has not disclosed the specific locations of these job losses.

The majority of its vehicle production takes place at UK facilities, including Solihull in the West Midlands and Halewood in Merseyside, as well as in Slovakia.

Iran war helps Shell earnings soar

Shell has revealed a better-than-expected 70 per cent surge in half-year earnings thanks to its best quarterly performance for four years. The FTSE 100 giant saw underlying earnings jump to \$16.75bn (£12.55bn) as its oil traders capitalised on the highly volatile cost of crude. The group said underlying earnings at its chemicals and products unit – including its oil trading business – jumped to £2.15bn, up significantly from £141m a year ago. This helped offset falling gas production, which tumbled by 31 per cent due to an Iranian attack on its Qatar gas-to-liquids plant at the start of the current Middle East conflict.

Shell has profited from trading on oil price swings, with the cost of Brent crude surging as high as \$120 a barrel at one stage before dropping to pre-war levels and back up past \$90 this week amid fraught negotiations between the US and Iran. While its Pearl site in Qatar has not been able to produce gas since the missile attack, production has been boosted group-wide thanks to a strong performance at other facilities globally.

Lloyds targets £2bn cost-cutting as profits jump

Lloyds Banking Group has reported a substantial jump in profits, while unveiling an ambitious new four-year strategy centred on artificial intelligence and digital transformation to unlock an additional £2bn in cost savings. It announced a pre-tax profit of £4.3bn for the six months to the end of June, marking a 23 per cent increase compared to the same period last year.

Lloyds confirmed it is on track to achieve more than £2bn in gross cost savings between 2022 and 2026. It is targeting a further £2bn in cost reductions by 2030.

Chief executive Charlie Nunn said: “We do think that there are new opportunities with agentic AI to both differentiate our services and grow more efficiently, ie provide services we’ve never been able to provide. So being able to provide investment advice to anyone in the UK that wants to talk to us with really well-trained agents.”

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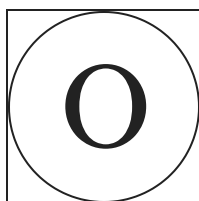


Howe-way the lad: manager's shock exit leaves Newcastle in a shambles

Eddie Howe oversaw the arrival of a first domestic trophy in 70 years at St James' Park, but leaves with the club's Saudi project facing stagnation, writes **Richard Jolly**



Howe has left Tyneside after five years at the club (PA)



nce again, Eddie Howe can be bracketed alongside two of Tyneside's favourite faces. This time, however, it is in less enviable fashion. Sir Bobby Robson and Kevin Keegan left Newcastle suddenly in late summers, decisions seemingly taken at the wrong time plunging them into transition and trouble. At least, unlike a couple of distinguished predecessors, Howe has gone before a season has started and not after a few games.

But it is less than four weeks before it begins, following a 4-1 friendly defeat to Bristol City, when it seems the team Howe built is falling apart. Howe was a transformative and terrific Newcastle manager, but the danger is his five-year reign comes to be the anomaly in their recent history, a period of achievement surrounded by underachievement.

Howe did something even Robson and Keegan could not and took a trophy to Tyneside: Newcastle's first since 1969, their first in English football in seven decades. Go back 17 months, to the day they won the Carabao Cup, and Howe was asked about getting his own statue at St James' Park. With characteristic modesty, he deflected the questions. Was he, he was asked, a legend? "We don't put ourselves in that bracket," he said. "We will let other people decide that when we are long gone."

Now he is gone; from Howe's perspective, there may be a relief that a burden is lifted. His probable replacement, Matthias Jaissle, will inherit a host of problems, few of them created by Howe, many of them making his task increasingly hard in the last year.



The 48-year-old lifted the Carabao Cup in 2025... (Getty)



...but leaves with his squad falling apart (PA)

Results show the downturn. Newcastle lost six of their last nine league games last season, nine of 17. They were beaten home and away by Sunderland. A Champions League campaign that had been heartening came to an ignominious end with a 7-2 walloping by Barcelona.

Howe had constructed a side with an identity. Yet even as he restored the sense there was something special about Newcastle, perhaps it was not enough for players: both those he had and those he coveted. Newcastle had the tag of the world's richest club, but they could not spend as such and lacked the allure that wealth was supposed to bring.

With Howe leaving, it is easy to envisage Bruno Guimaraes going to Arsenal now, a fourth departure of a high-class player in under a year, following Alexander Isak, Anthony Gordon and Sandro Tonali. The combined proceeds will be around £370m; a reminder that Howe often improves players, but is also leaving a gaping hole in the side. He could wish Elliot Anderson was still around to occupy the void in midfield, but the PSR-enforced sale of the Geordie in 2024 looks one of the major issues the Newcastle hierarchy have botched in recent years: the delayed

departure of Isak, who Howe would probably have rather left earlier, last summer is another case in point, lucrative as it was.

But the departures have been compounded by the lack of arrivals; or not the right ones, anyway, given that Newcastle spent £250m last summer. Until then, Howe had an outstanding record in the transfer market, but only Malick Thiaw of the 2025 influx was a success. Then this summer has proved a continuation of last. Elite players have kept turning Newcastle down: Victor Munoz and Johan Manzambi this summer, a host of forwards who would have been a better fit than Nick Woltemade or Yoane Wissa last year. Now, seeing how Newcastle have unravelled, the probability is that Hugo Ekitike, Benjamin Sesko and Joao Pedro do not regret their choices.



Bruno Guimaraes (left) is set to become Newcastle's fourth high-class departure in under a year, 12 months on from Alexander Isak's messy exit (PA)

In the post-mortem of Howe's regime, the dropped £125m double act of Woltemade and Wissa figure prominently. So does Isak, the man who scored at Wembley against Liverpool to secure that silverware but then provided the beginning of the end when he eyed the exit.

Before then, Howe constructed a formidable side from the rubble he walked into: a club who were still winless in

November, who went on to reach two finals, qualify for the Champions League twice, whose best was such that they could beat the top teams.

Howe's Newcastle were at their best when operating at maximum intensity. They struggled more when they had to play in both England and Europe, partly due to injuries. But even within that, there was still the seminal 4-1 demolition of Paris Saint-Germain, Dan Burn flying through the Tyneside air to head in his goal. Howe was the architect of many a magnificent St James' Park night, the man from the south coast who became a hero in the northeast.

Now it is up to the men from the Middle East: Jaissle, who has succeeded at Al Ahli, the Saudi Public Investment Fund, the owners who have preferred to keep their counsel, and their representatives at St James' Park, sporting director Ross Wilson and CEO David Hopkinson. But at times in the last year, it seemed that only Howe was holding Newcastle together. His exit leaves them looking like a shambles.

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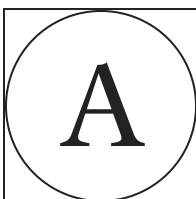


Inside Uefa's World Cup boycott plans – and what Fifa might do next

The decision by European footballing bodies to reject Gianni Infantino's plans to sell off stakes in the historic tournament could have ramifications right across the game, writes **Miguel Delaney**



Holders Spain are among the European nations threatening to boycott the World Cup
(Reuters)



At the start of the emergency meeting that saw Uefa drop “a nuclear bomb” on Gianni Infantino's plans to privatise the World Cup, federation president Aleksander Ceferin uttered a phrase that would be echoed a few times over the next two hours.

“Enough is enough.”

That may not just apply to the project and Infantino's leadership of Fifa, which is now suddenly under serious threat, but also the wider football world.

Language about weapons is arguably appropriate because this is now a war, and it is one that football has long needed. Infantino's move is unprecedented and would break what international football is, but it didn't come out of a vacuum. It came out of a 40-year commercialisation of the game that Uefa itself has been complicit in.

Even that has its limits, though, as can be seen with the announcement that the 55 Uefa countries will boycott all Fifa competitions if Infantino presses ahead with his plan.

Almost everyone involved can see the real cost here beyond Infantino's promises of \$40m to associations who go along with him. It isn't just selling off parts of the game but allowing the most nakedly capitalistic influences in – to have considerable say on every decision.

It has been described as a “very bad securitisation deal” for an asset that isn't even “distressed”.

Uefa's overtly collective stance is itself instructive since that also tests some of the game's structures. One reason that figures around Infantino were so confident in this plan was how Fifa politics work. Money distribution is a vote-returning mechanism, and this was more money than most had ever seen. Smaller associations could clear debts.



Uefa president Aleksander Ceferin (right) has made a power play (*Reuters*)

Indeed, before Uefa's meeting, the leadership had been conscious of how persuasive Infantino's plans were to countries of fewer resources.

So, Uefa began to work on cracking the whip. The deck for Fifa's plans – essentially “selling off football's crown jewels in perpetuity” – is said to have hardened resolve.

By the time yesterday's 2pm meeting started, with the vast majority of representatives phoning in via video call, the spirit was one of unity.

After Ceferin opened proceedings, insisting that this “isn't about him and Gianni” and that he never wanted a fight with Fifa, he pointed to the simple reality that the global body already has all the money it's going to need.

FA chair – and Fifa vice-president – Debbie Hewitt was the next major figure to speak, and was the first to mention the “boycott”, while criticising governance under Infantino's leadership.

The speech received praise from other members, something all the more notable since England's reticence had previously been

noted; the FA is in line to host the 2035 Women's World Cup and is said to want another.

That the boycott will apply to all Fifa competitions is even more damaging for Infantino, since so much of his plan is based on the global body realising some of the immense value of the European club game. That's what is most attractive to his investors, too. The 2029 edition of the Club World Cup hasn't even been agreed on yet, though, and currently looks some way off.



FA chair Debbie Hewitt took a critical stance despite ties with Fifa (*PA Wire*)

It's why it's currently impossible to see how this can proceed, with the impact so substantial that it could well bring the Swiss-Italian official's downfall.

Numerous officials at the meeting questioned his leadership, which was described as everything from "dictatorship behaviour" to "not what you'd expect from a true leader".

Another Fifa Executive Committee member, Razvan Burleanu, directly pointed the finger at Infantino, while Wales's Noel Mooney – who did stress individual federations still need funding – asked if there could still be faith in Infantino.

This is now open season, in a way that was previously unheard – at least in public. Uefa and other confederations are already looking at prospective challengers for the next election.

It's impossible not to conclude that Infantino has overreached, resulting from overconfidence that came from being in the World Cup and Donald Trump bubble for so long.

He'd got through the Folarin Balogun affair, the ticket prices, the “hydration breaks”, the Fifa peace prize, the deliverance of the World Cup to Saudi Arabia by acclamation and all manner of unilateral decisions and governance by fiat until he inevitably went too far.

Some have described this as “the most unreal unforced error” possible and “the beginning of the end for Infantino”. He is said to have confused support for another term with support for any decision.

Another senior figure said the privatisation plan was “the straw that finally broke the wafer-thin peace pact since the Super League”.

And we're now into a potentially new world.



Paris Saint-Germain president Nasser al-Khelaifi has been mooted as a possible challenger to Infantino (*Getty*)

Some nations – including those outside Europe – are beginning to wonder whether this might actually be the opportunity to break Fifa’s one-country, one-vote structure, and even such distinctive confederation separation. Why not have worldwide qualifiers, especially as such games lessen in commercial value? Whether you agree with that or not, the entire system has long looked very antiquated.

Either way, the repercussions are going to be huge, and there may be plenty of unintended consequences. That may apply to Uefa, too. Despite the show of unanimity, some smaller nations like Azerbaijan say they would have liked more of a chance to speak. Around 50-60 per cent of the countries got an opportunity to do so, and the one that offered the most qualified view was Scotland. Others, meanwhile, believe those close to Infantino are going to try to pick off any vulnerabilities.

The Uefa meeting didn’t actually come to a formal vote, though. Towards the end, Ceferin simply asked whether everyone backed the position: to boycott. There was no show of hands, so Uefa was free to issue its statement. That’s how politics work there, too.

As to what happens next, this has the potential to blow up the current structure. That has long been needed, but may not result in the new system required.

This crisis has rightly been likened to the Super League, and is arguably even bigger due to its global complications, but look how that ended.

Paris Saint-Germain president Nasser al-Khelaifi was elevated to the top of the game's main club body, European Football Clubs. His primary responsibility is to the Emir of Qatar. Al-Khelaifi is currently being mooted as a challenger to Infantino.

We may be into a new world, but still with so many old themes. Enough is enough, with more to come.

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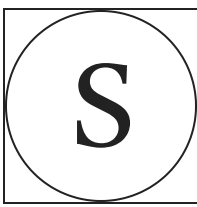


England and Fleming is a marriage of convenience – but it might just work

Stephen Fleming, despite a lack of red-ball coaching experience, has been selected to steady the England Test ship after the messy departure of fellow New Zealander Brendon McCullum, writes **Harry Latham-Coyle**, and while his task is big, he may have the tools to succeed



On the face of it, Fleming's credentials are modest: there is no red-ball coaching whatsoever on his CV (PA)



Stephen Fleming always seems to possess a wonderful sense of timing. It was on 12 July that England made the decision to stand down Brendon McCullum as Test head coach and, in serendipitous circumstances, on 13 July that the man they would come to anoint as his successor began his search for a new job. It was nothing more than mere coincidence that the Chennai Super Kings and Fleming mutually parted ways so soon after his former teammate's departure, but within three days he was expressing interest in the England role in a newspaper interview, and within three weeks impressing the ECB interview panel sufficiently for a hasty appointment after Andy Flower had withdrawn himself from consideration for the role.

Not that Fleming will arrive with undue hustle or hurry; Marcus Trescothick will take interim charge of the three Tests against Pakistan this summer before the 53-year-old begins a four-year deal ahead of the tour to South Africa in December. While Fleming has expressed a desire to spend time with his family, it is a curious situation that again highlights the mistake made by the ECB in not taking the opportunity for a clean break after the Ashes.

One might term this, then, a marriage of convenience – a coach in search of a new challenge taking over a team in need of new direction. On the face of it, Fleming's credentials are modest: there is no red-ball coaching whatsoever on his CV, nor any past suggestion of a desire to turn away from a franchise T20 circuit he was perhaps the first coach to truly master. He had even turned England down in 2009, feeling it was too soon into his coaching career.



Fleming proved highly successful with Chennai Super Kings in the IPL (Getty)

But this is not necessarily another jamming of a square peg into a round, vacant hole. The truth is that requiring experience of a role like being England Test coach would limit the pool to only past occupiers of the position – particularly with the complicating factor of one’s predecessor remaining as a colleague and, at times, competitor.

McCullum remains, of course, as white-ball coach, which could cause conflict; to slot in a man sufficiently close to his former teammate to have gone into business was surely a key factor in Fleming’s appointment. A similar ethos may be implemented differently with a younger side in need of fresh messaging.

“Stephen Fleming is one of the most highly respected figures in cricket, and we are very fortunate that someone of his calibre is willing to take on the challenge of being the England men’s Test head coach,” Rob Key, the ECB’s managing director of men’s cricket, said. “I believe he is the best person to guide a team stacked full of potential and turn that talent into a world-class outfit that cannot only achieve success but sustain it.”



England are looking to recapture their best form in the Test arena (Getty)

Past stints in the County Championship, particularly at Nottinghamshire, will be cited, too, though it is tough to find an individual of Fleming's generation who did not enrich the English game with their visiting presence. Instead, one should look to his work at CSK – in the fractured, fractioned and faction-filled world of modern cricket, a 17-year stint laden with trophies is to be commended. It will, too, have provided some insight into the scrutiny he will now come under; the symbiotic relationship forged with MS Dhoni, a laidback but highly intuitive leader, is one that Key will hope the oft-understated Fleming can strike with Joe Root.

Even within the statement announcing his appointment were hints that Root's return as captain is likely to be a temporary arrangement, though, with Fleming pointedly making reference to his excitement about working with Harry Brook. The vice-captain's time will surely come. The ECB must, however, reflect on the paucity of choices that have forced them to go back to a 35-year-old left worn down and worn out by the captaincy his first time around; Root really should have been left in the ranks. But with Brook carrying a significant burden already, a reinstatement was the better of two bad options.



Joe Root returns as England Test captain (PA)

Fleming hopes that he can provide a more pleasurable experience for his right-hand man. “I know what it feels like to have the weight of leadership and international cricket take their toll, and when that happened to me, my love for the game was rekindled by going to Notts and winning the County Championship,” the head coach said with reference to Root. “English cricket gave that to me, and it is a privilege to have this chance to give something back.”

There are other issues, mind, to be solved. Where McCullum’s task to revitalise and rejuvenate was clear on his arrival, Fleming’s assignment is tougher. England are unsettled in the top three, with Jacob Bethell a doubt for the start of the Pakistan series and Emilio Gay yet to cement his spot, and inevitably unbalanced by Ben Stokes’s retirement. There is no like-for-like replacement as a seam bowling all-rounder, which has ramifications elsewhere; it may be hard to pick a specialist spinner, for example, or build a bowling attack around an array of seamers that can sometimes feel at its best in bursts. It has felt like a team inexorably on the slide.

Fleming may thus see a blank canvas; others, a jumbled puzzle of pieces that may not fully fit. By the time he commences his role, he will have a matter of nine months to prepare for an Ashes series that – McCullum will attest – will form a large part of his overall appraisal. England's new head coach took on Australia 14 times during his Test career and did not once taste victory. Turn their trajectory around before next summer and he will have proven a very shrewd appointment indeed.

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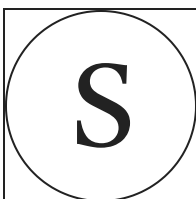


‘Ego never leaves a fighter, and that’s the problem’ surrounding retirement

Alex Pattle dives into the new Sky Sports film ‘The Final Round’ and speaks to champion turned pundit Johnny Nelson, a key voice in the documentary, about the pitfalls of life after the ring



‘It’s a very lonely existence. Your wife, brother, mother, sister don’t get it,’ says former world champion Nelson (Getty)



Sky Sports’s new documentary is stacked with sobering soundbites. In one scene, boxing coach Joe Gallagher recalls hearing a mother ask her son: “Are all the lows worth that one high?” The answer, of course, was “yes”. As Gallagher puts it: “Everyone wants their own *Rocky* story.”

But as Sky explores, that doesn't always mean a rousing underdog story. *Rocky*'s sequels showed Sylvester Stallone's character struggling with retirement, and this is the premise of *The Final Round*.

Released today, the film features interviews with former world champions like Johnny Nelson and Josh Warrington, while Gallagher and Dominic Ingle are among the coaches to speak, promoter Eddie Hearn features, and commentator Andy Clarke weaves together themes of "addiction", sacrifice, and ego.

The documentary even includes one of the final interviews with the late, great Ricky Hatton, whose internal fights after retiring matched any that he had in the ring.

Many boxers tell themselves, "I've got one more good fight in me," Hatton says. "Nine times out of 10, you haven't. That was the case with me."

Indeed, in 2022, a 42-year-old Hatton boxed Marco Antonio Barrera in an exhibition, and he was even due for another before his untimely death last September.



Josh Warrington was expected to retire after losing to Leigh Wood in February, but he is yet to make up his mind (Getty)

“Ego never leaves a fighter, and that’s the problem,” Nelson says. It outlasts the “fire”, he adds, shrewdly touching on an unfair fight between the two emotions.

Yet it’s not just about fire and ego; a question of identity arises, as does a fear of life post-boxing. Retirement is “frightening”, says heavyweight veteran Dave Allen, who reversed his own exit from the sport. “Apart from ‘Dad’, I’m just a boxer. I’m not even David, the normal human being.”

Warrington, whose boxing future is up in the air at the time of writing, explains: “I wake up on fight day and it’s like everything’s brighter, everything smells better, I’m more alert... that’s an unreal feeling.” And then the kicker: “Once that stops, you’ll never feel it again.”

Does this explain Tyson Fury’s five false retirements? Perhaps. They get their own spotlight in the documentary, as do comebacks that occur decades after retirement: for example, a 58-year-old Mike Tyson facing a 27-year-old YouTuber, Jake Paul, in 2024.

The film touches on how boxers don’t just miss the buzz of fight night, but also the camaraderie of their gyms, while the financial turmoil that has afflicted many fighters gets significant screen time.

Most boxers need a second job, and promoter and manager Steve Wood explains: “Ninety per cent of the fighters I look after are not earning enough to pay tax. I’ve had a couple of world champions; they’re the only two likely to be able to retire comfortably.”



A 42-year-old Ricky Hatton boxing in an exhibition match, four years before his death (PA)

In an interview with *The Independent*, Nelson touches on all of these topics, as well as his plans to create a proper pension scheme for boxers – something his own promoter, Eddie’s father Barry Hearn, attempted unsuccessfully.

Barry tried putting a small percentage of boxers’ purses towards a pension, but fighters’ distrust and/or short-term thinking thwarted the plan. Nelson, who toyed with his own comeback nine years after retiring, reflects on receiving a £97,000 pension from Hearn several years ago, inspiring the 59-year-old.

Nelson wants to create a scheme that would pay £2,000 into a pension for each boxer every year, as long as the fighter competes two to three times annually and puts 5 per cent of their purse into the same pension – with the money coming from a combination of TV companies, government grants, and private sponsorship. Nelson has spoken to the British Boxing Board of Control, figures in parliament, Scottish Widows, and potential financiers while trying to get the scheme off the ground.

“If I was a parent and my son wanted to box, I wouldn’t want him to box for a career, because they’ve got nothing to show for it,” Nelson says. “There’s no aftercare. Everybody’s running for

the trees, nobody wants to take responsibility for the fighters creating the entertainment.

“The amount of household names I could tell you that are absolutely on their ass, they’ve got nothing, and that financial pressure on top of the other effects of boxing has accumulated over the years. How can your mental health be stable? How *can* it be?”

In general, Nelson articulates the existence of a boxer with ease.

“That animalistic instinct we have, there’s nothing you can adapt it to in everyday life – not an office or anything like that, because it’s barbaric,” he says. “It’s a very lonely existence. Your wife, brother, mother, sister don’t get it. The aches and pains are lonely, the thought processes are lonely.



Nelson (pictured in 2001) retired from boxing in 2005 but flirted with a comeback nine years later (*Getty*)

“You do it first for the love of it, then money comes into it, then ups and downs, so we still do it – but resentfully. You’ve not got time to have a full-time job, so [you may think]: ‘People see me on a dizzy high, and then I’ve got to go and work on a building site. God, I’ve got to deal with the shame of that.’

“You’re resentful of how human nature can change: when you retire, people no longer look up to you as an amazing fighter. ‘He’s overweight, he’s not who he was.’ They talk to you like they talk to anybody, whereas when you’re a fighter, they talk to you with respect.”

Nelson is now one of the most thoughtful and respected pundits in boxing, but he could not have foreseen this future while immersed in his past.

“I thought boxing was the only option I had,” he reflects. “I left school with the reading and writing ability of a 10-year-old. I wasn’t thick – I just wasn’t academically astute – but I thought I was. I’d got nothing on paper to say, ‘Johnny is really good with people,’ so that wisdom doesn’t get you a job. What gets you a job is a diploma, work experience. So, panic set in. I could have easily ended up in prison.”

As *The Final Round* shows, boxing can be its own kind of prison, but a champion who escaped relatively early and safely was Anthony Crolla, who retired on a win just before turning 33.

“You can’t let boxing take more from you than you take from boxing,” he says astutely in the film. If only it were that simple.

Watch ‘The Final Round’ on Sky Sports Main Event at 10.30pm tonight, or on demand, and on Sky Sports’ YouTube channel from tomorrow



Sports news in brief



Aziz Abdul, grandson of Ugandan Idi Amin, claimed his disqualification in Edinburgh was due to racism (*Getty*)

Amin grandson has racism claim dismissed

Commonwealth Games chief Donald Rukare has rejected Ugandan boxer Aziz Abdul's racism claim following his disqualification from a super-heavyweight bout on Wednesday. Abdul, the grandson of Uganda's late dictator Idi Amin, was thrown out of his fight against England's Damar Thomas in the third and final round for a headbutt. He immediately alleged discrimination based on his nationality.

"Of course it's unfair," Aziz stated. "When you watch the previous fights of England, their boxers create a lot of fouls and they play a lot of bullshit. I am a black African, I know. I don't [know] why the officials are scared about this fight."

Rukare, who is also Ugandan and heads Commonwealth Sport, dismissed his compatriot's accusations. "We at Commonwealth Sport believe that every athlete is treated fairly in a non-

discriminatory manner,” Rukare said. “It was a field-of-play decision.”

The dramatic contest at the Scottish Exhibition Centre saw Abdul, noticeably shorter than his English opponent, receive a standing count in the first round. He was then penalised in the second for punching out of a clinch before the decisive headbutt on Thomas’s chin led to his disqualification in the third. World Boxing, the federation responsible for organising the Glasgow competition, declined to comment on the incident.

England win men's 4,000m team pursuit gold

Charlie Tanfield relished a long-awaited win over Australia after England clinched the men’s 4,000 metres team pursuit gold medal at the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow yesterday.

The England team of Tanfield, Henry Hobbs, William Tidball and Ethan Vernon trailed by 0.035 seconds at the halfway stage but hauled back to claim gold by over a second.

Tanfield, who was part of the Great Britain team pursuit team nudged into silver by the Australians in the Paris 2024 Olympic final, said: “I feel like my whole career has been about the team pursuit and it being us versus the Aussies.”

Welsh trio Emma Finucane, Rhian Edmunds and Lowri Thomas edged out England’s Katy Marchant, Sophia Capewell and Rhianna Parris-Smith to win gold in the women’s team sprint.

Wales set the fastest time in qualification and built on the bronze medal they won in Birmingham four years ago by blazing home in a new Commonwealth Games-record time of 46.760secs.

Scotland’s Neil Fachie won his sixth Commonwealth Games gold medal after partnering with Aaron Pope to win the men’s tandem B 1,000m time trial, ahead of Wales’s James Ball, piloted by Matthew Rotherham.

England criticise decision to rerun T54 1500m race

England have criticised the decision by para-athletics authorities to stage a rerun of the women's T54 1500 metres race at the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow after Wednesday's final was marred by a first-lap crash.

Scotland's Melanie Woods streaked to victory in a new Games-record time ahead of Canada's Nandini Sharma, who was disqualified for her part in the crash, upgrading England's Ellis Kottas to silver.

Woods was allowed to undertake a full lap of honour followed by medal-winning media rounds yesterday morning before organisers announced the race will be rerun this morning, following further protests from Australia and Mauritius.

Campbell wins weightlifting gold for England

Emily Campbell cooked up a new Commonwealth Games record as she retained her women's 86+kg weightlifting title in emphatic fashion in Glasgow.

The 32-year-old double Olympic medallist secured gold with her first clean-and-jerk lift of 148kg, going on to complete further lifts of 155kg and 163kg before dancing off the stage to raucous acclaim.

Thitikul sets pace at AIG Women's Open

Lottie Woad and Charley Hull lead British hopes after round one of the AIG Women's Open at Royal Lytham and St Annes. Woad, the 22-year-old from Surrey, carded a bogey-free, two-under-par 69 with a birdie on the par-five sixth and a monster putt for a two on the 12th. Hull briefly moved to three under after holing from off the green on the 15th, but the 30-year-old from Kettering undid that good work by finding the front bunker on the next to slip back to two under.

Jeeno Thitikul leads the way, the 23-year-old from Thailand who is still seeking a first major title hitting seven birdies in a flawless seven-under 64. Ominously, Ryu Hae Ran is two back after a

draining a 15-footer on the last for a five-under 66. The Korean, 25, is looking for a third straight major title having won the Women's PGA and the Evian Championship.

Japan's Shiho Kuwaki is joint second on five under but world No 1 Nelly Korda, who like Ryu is looking for a third major win this year, hit four bogeys in an underwhelming 73.

Scottish Rugby CEO sacked after investigation

Scottish Rugby (SRU) has sacked CEO Alex Williamson after a lengthy investigation into his conduct. The governing body gave no details as to the specifics of the investigation but, after a process begun in May, announced that he had been removed permanently from his position. Current chief financial officer David White looks set to become interim chief executive while the governing body begins the process of finding a permanent replacement.

Williamson was appointed as the successor to departing CEO Mark Dodson in September 2024 and began work at Murrayfield in early 2025. He previously ran the Goodwood Estate and was a former CEO of department store chain House of Fraser but has been sacked around 18 months after taking up the role at Scottish Rugby.

The SRU will now have to seek a replacement less than two years after its previous recruitment process. It comes at a time when Scottish Rugby is entering a hugely important period, with the inaugural Nations Championship continuing with games at Murrayfield this autumn, a pivotal Six Nations in the spring and then the 2027 Rugby World Cup in Australia next October.

Chelsea sign Lacroix in £52m deal

Chelsea have signed defender Maxence Lacroix from Crystal Palace for £52m, with the France international agreeing a deal until 2032, the Premier League club announced yesterday. The 26-year-old French international made 55 appearances last season, contributing three goals and three assists as Palace won

the Uefa Conference League by beating Rayo Vallecano 1-0 in the final.

Palace signed him from Wolfsburg in 2024 for a reported £18m, and Lacroix made 98 appearances for the club across two seasons under Oliver Glasner. He also made France's World Cup squad this summer and featured in three matches as the team finished fourth after losing their semi-final to Spain, before being beaten by England 6-4 in the third-place play-off.

Chelsea have already spent big this summer, having signed Morgan Rogers for £117m from Aston Villa last week, while 35-year-old striker Danny Welbeck looks set to also join the club on a two-year deal from Brighton. Meanwhile, Jordan Henderson is also closing in on a free transfer to Stamford Bridge from Brentford.

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